TEMPLE TOWER

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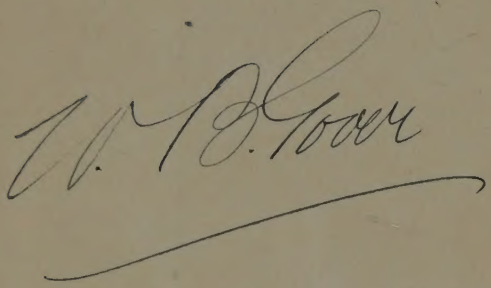
W. B. Gover



TEMPLE TOWER

BOOKS BY

"SAPPER"

Bull-Dog Drummond
The Black Gang
The Third Round
The Final Count
The Female of the Species
Temple Tower
The Saving Clause
Word of Honour
Out of the Blue
Jim Maitland
The Dinner Club
The Man in Ratcatcher
Jim Brent
John Walters
Shorty Bill

HODDER AND
STOUGHTON
Ltd., London

TEMPLE TOWER

A Bull-Dog Drummond Novel

BY

"SAPPER"

HODDER AND STOUGHTON LTD.

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CHAPTER I

IN WHICH THE "MAID OF ORLEANS" LEAVES FOR BOULOGNE

THE *Maid of Orleans* drew slowly away from the side. Leaning over the rail was the usual row of cross-Channel passengers calling out final good-byes to their friends on the quay. An odd Customs man or two drifted back to their respective offices: the R.A.C. representative raised protesting hands to High Heaven because one of his charges had departed without his triptyque. In fact, the usual scene on the departure of the Boulogne boat, and mentioned only because you must start a story somewhere, and Folkestone harbour is as good a locality as any.

Standing side by side on the quay were two men, who had been waving their hands in that shamefaced manner which immediately descends on the male sex when it indulges in that fatuous pursuit. The targets of their innocent pastime were two women, whose handkerchiefs had fluttered in response from the upper deck. And since these two charming ladies do not come into the matter again it might be as well to dispose of them forthwith. They were, in short, the wives of the two men, departing on their lawful occasions to Le Touquet, there to play a little golf and lose some money in the Casino. Which is really all that needs to be said about them, except possibly their

last remark chanted in unison as the ship began to move :

"Now mind you're both good while we're away."

"Of course," answered the two men, also in unison.

And here and now let us be quite clear about this matter. Before ordering a dinner the average man consults the menu. If his mouth is set for underdone beef with horse-radish sauce it is as gall and wormwood to him to be given mutton and red-currant jelly. Similarly, before reading a book the average reader likes to have a pointer as to what it is about. Does it concern the Sheik of Fiction carrying off a beautiful white woman on his thoroughbred Arab ; or does it concern the Sheik of Reality riding a donkey and picking fleas out of his burnous? Does it concern a Bolshevist plot to blow up the policeman on point duty at Dover Street ; or does it concern the meditations of an evangelical Bishop on the revised Prayer-Book ? And honesty compels me to state that it concerns none of these things, which is just as well for all concerned.

But it occurred to me that the parting admonition of those two charming ladies might possibly be construed to mean that they feared their husbands would not be good during their absence. Far from it : such a thought never even entered their heads. It was just a confirmatory statement of a fact as certain as the presence of Nelson in Trafalgar Square.

"Dear lambs," they remarked to one another as the boat cleared the harbour, "it will do them good to have a few days' golf all by themselves."

However, I still haven't given this pointer. And with it the last hopes of those who insist on a love story will be dashed to the ground. They must have received a pretty severe jolt when this matter of husband and wife was alluded to, though a few of the more optimistic ones may have had visions of a divorce looming somewhere, or even a bit of slap and tickle. Sorry: nothing doing. So if this is the mutton of my restaurant analogy you know what to do. But don't forget this book weighs as much as "Pansy, or the Girl who Lost All for Love," and will do just as much damage to the aspidistra if you hit it. Another thing, too, which it does not concern is golf. On that fact, I must admit with shame and sorrow that these two miserable men had deceived their trusting wives. The larger and more nefarious of the two had actually addressed his partner in crime at breakfast that morning on the subjects of handicaps and niblicks and things, and what they were going to do during their few days at Rye. His eye had not twitched: his hand when he helped himself to marmalade had been steady. And yet he lied—the dirty dog—he lied.

And his companion in vice knew he had lied, though, to his everlasting shame, he said no word. Both of these scoundrels allowed their wives to leave them for a perilous sea voyage

with a falsehood ringing in their ears. Which shows you the type of men you're dealing with. However—that's that: I'll get on with it. Still not given the pointer? Oh! read the darned book and find out for yourself.

I will take the larger one first. His height was a shade over six feet in his socks: his breadth and depth were in proportion. Which, in boxing parlance, entitles him to be placed among the big men. And big he was in every sense of the word. His face was nothing to write home about, and even his wife admitted that she only used it to amuse the baby. Anyway, looks don't matter in a man. What does matter is his condition, and, reverting once more to boxing parlance, this man looked what he was—trained to the last ounce.

It has always been a bit of a marvel to me how Hugh Drummond kept as fit as he did, in view of his incredible capacity for lowering ale. Nevertheless, the bald fact remains that in the matter of fitness he had all of us beat to a frazzle. I particularly wish to emphasise that fact, because I believe that this is the first occasion that one of his really intimate friends has written about him. Take, for instance, the extraordinary adventure with that crazy woman, Irma, on Salisbury Plain. Joe Dixon wrote that, and Joe, good fellow though he is, hardly knew Hugh at all. But fourteen years have gone by since I first met him, in the front line near Arras, and in fourteen years one gets to know a man. From which it will be

inferred that I was the other of the two nefarious scoundrels who had stood waving to their trusting wives from the quay.

Now, as will perhaps be remembered by those who have followed some of our adventures in the past, we got mixed up with a bunch of criminals shortly after the war. Their leader was a man named Carl Peterson, who was killed by Drummond in Wilmot's giant airship just before it crashed in flames. And that led up to the amazing happenings on Salisbury Plain that I have already alluded to, when Peterson's mistress kidnapped Drummond's wife and nearly got the lot of us. But she escaped, and the first thought that had sprung to my mind on getting Hugh's letter was that she had reappeared again. Up till now I had had no chance of speaking to him privately, but as the boat disappeared round the end of the jetty, I turned to him eagerly :

"What's the game, Hugh? Is it Irma on the scene again?"

He held up a protesting hand.

"My dear Peter," he remarked, "have you noticed that the sun is in the position technically known as over the yardarm?"

"And as the Governor of North Carolina said to his pal, let's get to it," I answered. "What about the Pavilion Hotel?"

"It is a wonderful thing being married, Peter," he said thoughtfuly as we strolled along the platform.

"Marvellous," I agreed, and glanced at him

sideways: there was a certain note in his voice that confirmed my suspicions.

"And," he continued, "it is good for all of us to sacrifice something in Lent."

"It is June," I answered, "but the principle holds good."

"Peter," he said, as we fell into two easy chairs in the lounge, "your brain has probably jumped to the fact that it was not entirely due to a desire to beat your head off on Rye golf links that I engineered this little affair at Le Touquet. Waiter—two large tankards of ale."

"Some such idea had dawned on me," I agreed. "It seemed so remarkably sudden."

"My dear old lad," he said with a grin, "you can't imagine the diplomacy I had to use. I first of all suggested that we all four should go to Le Touquet—a proposal which was jumped at by my devoted spouse. I then wrote you that masterpiece of duplicity."

"Masterpiece it may have been," I laughed, "but it gave me brain fever trying to think of an excuse that would hold water."

"What did you cough up finally?" he asked.

"I wrote to my lawyer," I said, "and told him to write to me and say he'd got some urgent business on my dear old grandmother's will. Sounded a bit thin to me, I confess, but, by the mercy of Allah, it went down. And Molly was deuced keen to go."

"So, bless her, was Phyllis," answered Hugh. "Thin or not, Peter, it worked. For a few days

we are going to be bachelors. And much may happen in a few days."

"As you say," I agreed, "much may happen in a few days. At the same time, you haven't answered my first question. Is it Irma?"

"It is not, bless her. Maybe another time, for I should hate to lose her. But this time it's something quite, quite new."

He drained his tankard and pressed the bell.

"We will have the other half section, while I put you wise. Mark you, Peter, it may be the most hopeless mare's nest, and if it is we can always play golf. But somehow or other I don't think it is. In fact, in my own mind, I'm quite certain it isn't. You don't know this part of the world at all, do you?"

"Not a bit," I said.

"Well, the first thing to do is to give you a rough idea of the lie of the land. Once we leave Hythe we come to a large stretch of absolutely flat country which is known as Romney Marsh. The word 'marsh' is a misnomer, as the soil itself is quite hard and gives very good grazing. There are a few small villages dotted about, and an odd farmhouse or two, but the prevailing note is solitude. Motor charabancs cross it daily from Hastings and Folkestone, and the roads are good but a bit narrow. But it is a solitary sort of place for all that; you feel that anything might happen on it.

"A few centuries ago it was covered by the sea, which came right up to the foothills, so that all

of Romney Marsh is reclaimed land. And from those hills you get the most marvellous view away towards Dungeness and Lydd—if you like that type of view, that's to say. Open, free, with the tang of the sea in the wind. I love it; which was one of the deciding factors that led me to take our present house. It has a clear sweep for miles right out to sea, and I've installed a powerful telescope on the terrace—a telescope, Peter, which has been and is going to be of assistance. However, to return to our muttons. As I've told you, the Marsh itself is sparsely populated. The only considerable towns are Rye and Winchelsea —which can hardly be said to be on Romney Marsh at all. Rye is set on a sort of conical hill, and must in the olden days have been almost completely surrounded by water. But except for them, and Lydd, where the artillery range is, and New Romney, there's not much in the house line, and those that are there belong principally to small farmers.

"About a week ago—to be exact, the day before I wrote to you—I was undressing to go to bed. It was fairly early—not more than eleven or a quarter past—and after I had got into pyjamas I sat by the open window having a final cigarette. My dressing-room faces over the Marsh, and I could see the lights of a passing steamer going West. Suddenly, from the very middle of the Marsh itself, there came a red flash lasting about a second; then a pause, and a moment afterwards it was blue. They were re-

peated half a dozen times—red, blue, red, blue—then they ceased altogether.

"For a while I sat there staring out, wondering what on earth they could mean. By putting a couple of matches on my dressing-table I got the rough alignment so that I could get the direction in the morning—but I was sorely tempted to go out and investigate then and there. However, I decided not to; Phyllis was in bed, and I was undressed. And if the truth be told, Peter, even at that early hour the possibility of a little fun had struck me, and I didn't want to run the risk of cramping our style. So I didn't mention anything about it to the dear soul. That it was a signal of some sort seemed fairly obvious, but for what and to whom? The first thought that flitted across my mind was that smugglers were at work. For if rumour speaks the truth there is the devil of a lot of smuggling going on since these new silk duties were put on. There are stories told of fast motor-boats, and mysterious motor-cars that go careering about in the middle of the night. However, when I began to think things over a bit, I dismissed the smuggling theory. To put it mildly, it seemed unlikely that men engaged in such an extremely secret and risky business would take the trouble to advertise themselves by flashing red and blue lights all over the place. Besides, one would have expected the signal—if such it was—to be given towards the sea, and this was given towards the land. So I washed out smugglers.

"The next solution that presented itself was that it wasn't a genuine signal at all, but the work of some boy with a developed film sense. A joke inspired by 'Dandy Dick—the Cowboy's Terror,' or something of that sort. And leaving it at that, I fell asleep.

"The next morning I was up early. A mist was lying over the Marsh which lifted after a while, and I took a squint over my two matches. They, of course, gave me the right direction, but not elevation. That I had to guess. As I've told you, there are very few houses about, and there was only one through which the line of my matches passed. Moreover, as far as I could judge, though things look very different by day to what they do at night, that house gave me approximately the right elevation. So I went downstairs and focussed my telescope on it.

"It was, as I expected, an ordinary farmhouse. There seemed to be a couple of outhouses and four or five biggish trees. Moreover, the whole property stood isolated by itself, like a little island rising out of a lake. As far as I could judge, it stood about a quarter of a mile from the main road between Rye and New Romney, and was connected to it by a rough track. I could see no sign of life, until the front door opened and a woman with a pail in her hand came out and went into one of the outhouses. In every respect a peaceful country scene.

"However, I waylaid the postman that morning and got some more information from him. It

appeared that the place was known as Spragge's Farm. It belonged to a man of that name, and had belonged to his father and grandfather before him. The present man lived there with his wife, and, I gathered, was not a popular individual. He was surly and morose, and had the reputation of being a miser. Apparently he was quite well off, but he refused to keep a servant, making his wife do all the menial work. He had a ferocious temper, and on two or three occasions had been run in before the local Bench for actual physical violence to one of his farm hands, the result being that now he could get no one to work for him. Following up my second theory I asked if he had any children, and was told that he hadn't. But, I gathered, he occasionally took in a lodger who wanted quiet and rest. I further gathered that the usual duration of the said lodger's stay was not extensive, as he got neither rest nor quiet for his money. I asked if he had one now, but that the postman couldn't tell me. He hadn't heard of one, but then, Spragge's Farm wasn't on his beat. So having found out mighty little, I thanked him and he went off. And then, after he'd gone a few yards he turned round and came back. It appeared that he had suddenly remembered that the cards which Spragge had put in one or two of the shops in Rye, advertising that he took in boarders, had been removed recently, the assumption being that possibly he had given up that side line. And that comprised all the information I got.

"Off and on through the morning I had a look at the place, but nothing of the slightest interest did I see. Once a man came out who I assumed was Spragge himself, and I saw the woman two or three times, but except for that there was no sign of life about the farm. And after a while I began to wonder if the whole thing wasn't capable of some perfectly ordinary explanation; or possibly that the farm itself was not the origin of the lights.

"And then, Peter, there occurred the thing which caused my letter to you and the departure of our womenkind to-day."

Hugh lit a cigarette, and I followed suit. Up to date it struck me that the doings had been hardly such as to awake feverish excitement in the breasts of the troops, but I knew my man. Domesticity might have dulled him a little, but he could still spot the genuine article like a terrier spots a rat.

"We will now leave the Marsh," he continued, "and come to the higher ground where my house is. I've got no one near me—my next neighbour being about half a mile away. He, too, commands a view right out to sea, but there all similarity ends between us, I trust. His name is Granger, and he's a gentleman I've got remarkably little use for. In appearance, he is small and measly looking: you see smaller editions in a bit of ripe Stilton. As far as I know he lives alone, save for two servants—one a great bullock of a man who looks like a prize-fighter, the other an elderly female who cooks. I got those details

from my own staff, because I've never been inside his house myself. In fact, the only time I've met the blighter is occasionally out walking, when he is invariably accompanied by this professional pug. And it was on one such occasion that he stopped and spoke to me.

"'Captain Drummond, I believe,' he said.

"I admitted the soft impeachment, and wondered what was coming.

"'You and your wife must forgive my not calling on you,' he went on jerkily. 'I am a recluse, Captain Drummond, and my health is not of the best.'

"He rambled on, and when he'd finished I assured him that it did not matter in the least, and that we quite understood. I didn't add that the only thing we wouldn't forgive him for was if he *did* call, and we parted, leaving me with two very distinct impressions.

"The first was that, in spite of his name, the man was not pure English. There was a distinct trace of an accent in his voice, though I couldn't decide what. The second was that he was afraid of something. The whole time he was talking to me his eyes had been darting this way and that, as if he was perpetually on the lookout for some unexpected danger. Of course, it might have been only a mannerism, but that was the impression he gave me, and subsequent gossip confirmed my idea. The man was frightened, though whether of a specific individual or of people at large I didn't know.

"It appeared he had taken the house very soon after the war, and had immediately proceeded to fortify the place like a prison. There was already a high wall all round the house, and his first act was to have the top of it covered with a double row of long crossed steel spikes. His next performance was to have the existing open gates for the drive replaced by two heavy wooden ones whose tops were also covered with the same contraption of spikes. These were kept permanently locked, and the only way of getting in was through a small wicket let into one of them. But this was also kept locked, and before it could be opened a tremendous ceremony had to be gone through. My informant on all this once again was the postman. When the time came for the various errand boys to bring the provisions for the day, the prize-fighter took up his position by the wicket gate. When the bell rang he opened it and took the meat, or whatever it was, from the boy. Then everything was shut up again as before. The same with the postman, too. On the rare occasions when Mr. Granger got a letter he handed it to the bodyguard through the gate; he was never allowed to go up to the front door.

"But that wasn't all; I've only mentioned the outer line of defences up to date. The inner was just as thorough. Every window in the house was protected on the outside by iron bars, exactly like a prison cell. Even the attics had them; not only the ground floor rooms. That work was

done by a local man, so the countryside got full information—but a London firm was employed for other things, of which only vague rumours got round. Burglar alarms of the most modern type were installed, and trip wires in the grounds which rang gongs, and the Lord knows what else.

"However, there is no good elaborating the details. I've told you enough already to show you that my neighbour not only resented intrusion, but was determined to stop it. Naturally, in a country place like this the inhabitants buzzed like a hive of bees with curiosity, though when I took my place three years after, the excitement had died down. They had become used to him, and the generally accepted theory was that he was an eccentric who lived in terror of burglars. Colour was added to that idea by the doctor who, on one occasion, was called in to see him. It appeared that everything short of blindfolding the medico was done to prevent him seeing anything. He was rushed from the wicket gate to the front door, through the hall and up to the bedroom. And when he got there the prize-fighter remained in the room. Mark you, Peter, the doctor man told me this himself.

"He waited for the servant to go, and when he showed every intention of staying, he stuck in his toes. He told Granger, who was in bed, that he was not in the habit of having a third person in the room when he was examining a patient unless that person was a qualified nurse. Granger answered very querulously that the man

was his confidential valet and that he wished him to stay. The doctor replied to the effect that he didn't care a damn what he was, but that if he didn't clear out of the room Mr. Granger would have to obtain another doctor. Well, the long and the short of it was, that, after a while, and very reluctantly, the servant left the room, and the doctor got on with his job. As he said to me, he didn't really mind in the slightest if the man remained or if he didn't, but he was determined to see what would happen if he insisted.

"After he had made his examination, and prescribed something or other, he glanced round the room.

"'Lovely things you've got here, Mr. Granger,' he remarked casually.

"The invalid struck a little bell beside the bed, and the servant entered so quickly that he must have been just outside the door.

"'Show the doctor out,' said the sick man irritably. 'And I'll let you know, Doctor Sinclair, if I want you again.'

"Now the doctor, though one of the best, has the devil of a temper. And he let drive at that.

"'Your case is not one that I care to continue treating,' he said coldly. 'It is not your bodily health that requires attention, but your manners. My fee is half a guinea.'

"For a moment or two, so he told me, he thought the prize-fighter was going to strike him, but Granger pulled himself together.

"'Forgive me, doctor,' he said. 'I'm not

feeling my best to-day. Yes, there are some lovely things in this room, and, in fact, all over the house. That is why I have taken these somewhat elaborate precautions against unauthorised people gaining an entrance. A burglar's paradise, my dear sir ; a burglar's paradise. I trust you will forgive my momentary irritability, and continue as my medical attendant.'

"By that time Sinclair's anger had evaporated, and he said no more. And when he did go back next day the valet made no attempt to remain in the room. Even the precautions of the first day were relaxed a little, and he didn't have the impression that he was being marched along under an armed guard. But no time was wasted lingering about the house, and no further mention was made of what was in it.

"This yarn of the doctor's, as I say, was taken by most people to confirm the theory that Granger was frightened of burglars. And one has certainly heard of cases where miserly eccentrics have lived for years surrounded by their treasures, and protected by every sort of mechanical device. But though I said nothing about it at the time the solution didn't quite satisfy me. Even the most suspicious recluse would hardly suspect a respectable medical man of any desire to steal the spoons. So, why these elaborate precautions on the occasion of his visit ? Was it eccentricity on Granger's part which was almost akin to insanity : the result of a fear so great that he suspected any and everyone without exception ?

Or was it something deeper than that; and if so, what?

"Well, I set to work to puzzle it out. The first idea that occurred to me was that he was afraid for his life. That, again, was open to the same objection. You don't expect a doctor to pinch your spoons, but even less do you anticipate that he will murder you. So I dismissed that theory, and tried another. Was there something to conceal in the house which he didn't wish the doctor to see? Remember, the doctor is the only human being, as far as I know, who has ever been in the house from the outside world. I worked along that line for a bit, saying nothing to anybody, and the more I thought of it the more did I become convinced that I was on the right track. Of course, it was possible that he was afraid that the doctor might spot some of the inner secrets of his defences, but again the same darned old objection. If he did he was hardly likely to run round revealing his discovery to bands of burglars. So what was the mystery? If I was right, what was hidden inside? Was it a human being? Possibly, but the idea presented difficulties. Remember, Granger has been there for six years, and, in spite of all his safeguards, it would have been difficult to keep a fourth person in the house for all that time without someone spotting it. And if it wasn't a human being it must be some object. But surely it would have been perfectly simple to hide it away so that the doctor couldn't see it during his quick walk through the house. So

there I was up against a blank wall once more. And after a while I gave up worrying over the blamed thing ; it wasn't worth it. Perhaps someday the mystery, if any, would come out, and in the meantime I, outwardly, at any rate, subscribed to the theory that Mr. Granger was an eccentric old man who did not want to be disturbed, and had taken damned good care that he shouldn't be. Sorry for all this hot air, Peter, but I had to make it clear to you. We will now get on a bit quicker. The morning after I had seen the lights on the Marsh I went out for a stroll to the village. And that meant I had to go past Granger's house. Now don't forget that all my cogitations on his *ménage* had taken place months ago : I had long given up worrying my head about it. So that what happened cannot be fancy or imagination due to my suspicions. About a quarter of a mile before I got to his gates who should I see coming along the road but the man himself and his tame bruiser. Now on the rare occasions when I had met him we had always stopped and had a few words—generally platitudes about the weather. And as usual I halted as I came abreast of him and passed the time of day. He was a bit more affable than usual for some reason : in fact, he even managed to crack a smile over something that I said. And then, for some unknown reason, I mentioned the lights I'd seen on the Marsh. It was just a sudden impulse said without thought.

"Good Lord ! Peter, I thought the man had

gone mad. He stared at me with dilated eyes, and his lower jaw was shaking like a man with ague. And the pug wasn't much better.

"'Red and blue lights,' he stammered foolishly. 'Red and blue lights.'

"He was croaking in his agitation, and clutching the valet's arm with two trembling hands.

"'Where did you see them, Captain Drummond—these lights?'

"But by that time I'd taken a pull at myself: evidently there was a mystery in the offing, and I wasn't going to be too specific.

"'Somewhere on Romney Marsh,' I said vaguely. 'Why? What's all the excitement about?'

"'Red and blue,' he almost screamed to the valet. 'Santa Maria! Gaspard—it is he.'

"'Shut up,' growled the pug, though his own forehead was wet with sweat.

"But the other was beyond hope: he was in a state of gibbering terror.

"'Back to the house,' he kept on muttering. 'Hurry—for the love of the Virgin.'

"And away the pair of them went down the road with Granger clawing at the valet, and the valet glancing this way and that over his shoulder, as if he expected someone to materialise out of the hedge. For a while I stood staring after them foolishly: the whole thing was so totally unexpected. Then I followed them at a discreet distance, feeling a strong desire to laugh. They looked so damned ridiculous. Granger, as I think

I've mentioned, is a little man, and to see him hopping along beside that vast bullock of a valet who every now and then broke into a shambling run had its humorous aspect. They reached their front gate, and while the pug was fumbling with his key to open the wicket Granger kept dancing about in his agitation. Then they disappeared, and I heard an iron bar clang home. The fortress had been reached in safety."

Hugh paused and looked at me with a grin.

"Getting a bit nearer the meat juice, ain't we, Peter? Why should the fact that a red and blue light had been flashed on Romney Marsh inspire terror in the breasts of our Mr. Granger and his pugilistic companion? And no mild form of terror either. For if I'm a judge that man was sick with fear for his life."

"It would seem," I murmured mildly, "that the problem is one which can hardly be solved on paper. And since our wives are at Le Touquet, it might help to pass the agonising time till they rejoin us, if we——"

"Good lad," he laughed. "I knew you would."

"But, look here, Hugh," I said, "has nothing more happened? Have you seen the lights again?"

"Only once—three nights ago."

"And you haven't been down to this place—Spragge's Farm?"

He shook his head.

"I thought I'd wait for you, Peter. It seemed a crime to keep a thing like this to oneself."

"Just one small point, old man," I put in. "What about the police? If your surmise is right: if this man Granger is in fear of his life why hasn't he told the police about it? Or has he? Because if so——"

"He hasn't, Peter," he interrupted. "That I know. The local inspector is a great pal of mine. And since that very objection occurred to me, I made a point of meeting him. I brought the conversation round to Granger—never a difficult thing to do. And I'm convinced that if he had asked for police protection I should have heard of it. Therefore he hasn't. Why not? Because, laddie, he dare not. That's my answer to it. It's what I have thought all along. There is something that man has got to conceal, and he dare not run the risk of bringing the police in."

"It sounds feasible," I agreed. "Anyway what's the next move?"

"A couple of short ones. Then lunch. And after that we'll lay out a plan of campaign."

He led the way and I followed: thus it had always been in the past.

CHAPTER II

IN WHICH WE MEET TWO NEW ALLIES

I DON'T pretend for a moment, of course, that there was the slightest excuse to be offered for us. Manifestly the matter was no business of ours. If Mr. Granger chose to barricade his house with iron spikes it was his affair, and no one else's. Still I regret to say that there are people in this world who are as irresistibly drawn to a thick-ear atmosphere as a cat is to a saucer of milk. And Hugh Drummond was one of them, having been born that way.

In that way he differed from me: I only acquired the liking by force of his example. And I am bound to admit that had I been the one to see a red and blue light flashing on Romney Marsh, and realised that such a harmless, even peculiar phenomenon produced terror in the breast of my next-door neighbour, I should not have proceeded farther with the matter.

Wherefore the difference of our mental attitudes during lunch is easily understandable. Mine was principally concerned with our official position in the matter: his was entirely occupied with whether the thing was likely to produce some sport.

"My dear Peter," he said, as the waiter brought the coffee, "we haven't got any official position in the matter. So that's that, and there's

no use worrying about it. But it is manifestly the duty of every law-abiding citizen to investigate such a strange pastime as flashing coloured lights on the Marsh. Maybe it is some new method of catching moths: maybe not. Anyway we're darned well going to see."

"And the first move?" I asked.

"Is to call at Spragge's Farm," he answered. "We are not to know that his notice about rooms to let has been withdrawn. We will therefore, on the way back, present ourselves at the door, and you will ask if he can put you up. Say that you're suffering from nervous breakdown due to backing three winners in succession, and demand to see what accommodation he has to offer. Then say you'll let him know. We'll both keep our eyes skinned and perhaps we'll see something."

"Right ho!" I said resignedly. "As long as I'm not expected to stop at the bally place, I'll put up the palaver."

We paid the bill, and left the dining-room. Hugh's car was outside the hotel, a Bentley Sports model: and ten minutes later we had dropped down the hill to Sandgate and were running along by the sea towards Hythe.

"From now on, Peter," he said, "until we get actually to Rye itself the ground is dead flat. When we get out a bit further you'll see the range of hills away to the right where my house stands."

It was a hot, lazy afternoon, and the heat haze shimmered over the country which stretched dry

and parched on each side of the road. Even the usual breeze which one gets in the locality had died away, and the few cattle we saw were standing listlessly in what shade they could find. The disused red water cistern on Littlestone golf links dropped away behind us, and the Martello Towers ceased as we turned away from the sea after New Romney.

"Dungeness away there to the left," said Hugh briefly. "And Lydd. Now we're on the Marsh proper."

The road was good but narrow, with a deep ditch on each side, and he pointed out the spot to me where a motor charabanc had skidded and overturned one night, pinning the occupants underneath it till they were drowned in six inches of water.

"These grass sides to the road get slippery at times," he explained. "And then you want to watch it."

At length he stopped the car and lit a cigarette.

"Now, Peter," he said, "we approach our destination. That place there in front of us is Rye. Cast your eyes two fingers right and you will see on the hill an imposing red brick edifice. That is the house of Drummond. Straight in front of us you will see a smallish house in a clump of trees : that is Spragge's Farm. One finger to the right of my house, also on the hill, you perceive another house. That is our friend Granger's prison. Now you get the geography of the part that concerns us. And the great point, as you

will notice, is that if, as I am tolerably certain, those lights were a warning of some sort, Spragge's Farm is as good a place as any on the Marsh for Granger to see them from."

"Correct," I agreed. "Now what am I really to say to Spragge?"

"Any darned thing you like," he laughed as we started once more. "It's only a preliminary reconnaissance, and we can't expect much luck."

It was fortunate we didn't, because we had none at all. The farm stood about a quarter of a mile from the road, and a rough drive—little more than a stony lane—led up to it. A gate barred the entrance, and leaning over it was a morose looking individual smoking a pipe. He stared at us with scarcely veiled hostility as we pulled up, and made no effort to move.

"This is Spragge's Farm, isn't it?" said Hugh politely.

"It is," grunted the man without removing his pipe from his mouth.

"Do you know if Mr. Spragge is anywhere about?"

"I'm Mr. Spragge. What might you be wanting?"

Hugh's fingers began to drum on the steering wheel, and it wasn't difficult to tell exactly what he was wanting. But to clip a man over the jaw is not conducive to further conversation, and his voice remained studiously mild.

"I was told, Mr. Spragge," he said quietly "that you had a room to let at your farm. My

friend here is anxious for a place where he can finish—er—a book undisturbed. If your room is free he would like to see it."

The man removed his pipe, only apparently to enable him to spit with greater ease. Then he stared insolently from one to the other of us.

"You were told wrong," he grunted. "I've no room to let, and if I had I choose who I put up."

"Your choice must be fairly limited I should imagine," remarked Hugh, "if this is a fair sample of your manners. Nice chatty little fellow, aren't you, Mr. Spragge?"

The man straightened himself up, and the veins on his forehead began to stand out like whipcord.

"Look here, you damned dude," he said thickly, "you get out of this before I lose my temper. I speaks how I like, and to whom I like. But unless you're out of this pretty quick, I'll pull you out of your car and little Pansy-face beside you as well."

Hugh laughed pleasantly.

"And why should I get out of this, Mr. Spragge? This road is as much mine as yours, and you've no idea what a pretty picture you make leaning against that gate. True, your face leaves much to be desired, and your clothes are deplorable, but the general picture—the *tout ensemble*—of the Englishman guarding his home is quite wonderful. Don't you agree, Peter?"

I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye,

and saw the old well-remembered look on his face. He was deliberately goading the man on, though for what purpose I couldn't quite make out. This man Spragge was a powerful looking brute, and I failed to see any object in starting a rough house. And that was exactly what seemed imminent. With a flood of blasphemy the farmer flung open the gate, and slouched over to the car ; and as he came Hugh opened the door and stepped into the road.

"You —— ——" snarled Spragge. "I've warned you once : now you can have it."

I almost laughed : how many men had said words to that effect in days gone by ? And with the same result. Spragge shot out a fist like a leg of mutton, which encountered air, and the next instant he was lying flat on his back in the middle of the road, completely knocked out.

"Quick, Peter," said Hugh urgently. "Sling the blighter into the back of the car, and we'll take him to the farm. Heaven forbid, old man," he chuckled as the Bentley spun up the track, "that we should be so grossly inhuman as to leave this poor injured fellow lying in the road. His wife's tender care is essential, and—keep your eyes skinned. We might spot something."

We pulled up at the door, and almost immediately a woman appeared. She was a worthy helpmeet to Mr. Spragge : in fact I have seldom seen a more forbidding looking pair. Tall and gaunt, with a thin saturnine face and bony hands, she looked an even more unpleasant customer

than her husband. He was a powerful, foul-tempered brute: she looked the personification of evil.

"What has happened?" she asked harshly.

"Mrs. Spragge, I assume?" remarked Hugh politely. "I regret to state that your husband's jaw has encountered a hard substance, which has temporarily rendered him unconscious. So, my friend and I, at great personal inconvenience, have brought him to the dear old homestead. Shall we bring him in?"

Spragge was already beginning to stir uneasily, so there was no time to be lost if we were to get inside the house.

"I don't understand," she said angrily. "What has happened to the fool?"

"Far be it from me, madam," murmured Hugh, "to cavil at the excellent description of your spouse. But he will doubtless tell you all about it when he is his own bright self again."

We had slung him out of the car and laid him on the grass, and as Hugh spoke I suddenly became aware of a noise that rose and fell regularly. It came from the inside of the house, and at that moment, Hugh evidently heard it too. He grinned faintly, and looked at the woman.

"How nice it is to have a little peaceful nap in the afternoon," he murmured. "But you should never take in a lodger that snores, Mrs. Spragge."

"Get out of this," came a thick voice from behind us. Spragge, who had come to, had

raised himself on his elbow, and was glaring vindictively.

"Splendid," cried Hugh. "Our own bright boy again. A little arnica applied by mother, and the face will be as good as new. But tell me, who is the human fog-horn within?"

"Look here, mister," cried the woman shrilly, "you be off. This farm ain't no business of yours, and I'll thank you to get into your car and clear out."

"The ingratitude of woman," said Hugh resignedly. "After all I've done for poor Mr. Spragge too. Well, Peter, never shall it be said that we stayed where we weren't wanted. We'll go. But do tell little Ferdinand when he wakes that he ought not to sleep on his back."

He swung the car round, and as we went down the drive I glanced back. The man had scrambled to his feet, and was standing by his wife. And the two of them stood there motionless watching us, until we turned out of the drive into the main road.

"Not much out of that, Peter, I'm afraid," said Hugh. "All that we have established is that the Spragges are a very unsavoury pair, and that they have a man who snores staying in the house. But whether the man who snores is the red and blue light merchant, or whether it is any of them, Heaven alone knows. And as far as I can see there is only one way to find out."

"Which is?" I asked.

"To go there by night," he answered.

"That's when the activity is likely to occur. And I've somehow or other got a hunch that our musical sleeper is going to turn out to be very much in the picture. Let's go back to the house now, so that you can dump your kit: then we'll have dinner at the Dolphin in Rye, and do a bit of night work after. Jove! Peter, I'm beginning to feel quite young again."

"You'll be younger before you've finished," I said resignedly. "They tell me a few months in prison is a wonderful rejuvenator."

But he only grinned; in an affair of this sort he was beyond hope.

"Prison be blowed, old boy. We may be a pair of thugs, but we are young men from the Christian Association compared to this comic bunch. Besides, we can always retire from the contest if we want to."

At that it was my turn to grin: a lion can retire from its kill *if* it wants to. At any rate time would show: up to date beyond putting Mr. Spragge to sleep we were blameless.

The Bentley swung to the left as we came to Rye, and we took the circular road around the hill on which the town is built.

"Up that cobbled road to the right, Peter," said Hugh when we had gone halfway round, "is the Dolphin Inn. A famed resort for smugglers in the old days, and an extraordinarily good pub now. On your left is the road to Hastings, but we go straight on up to the higher ground."

We crossed the railway line, and another three

miles brought us to Hugh's house, where I dropped my baggage. As he said, the view over the Marsh was wonderful: it lay spread out in front of us like an aeroplane photograph.

"If you look through the telescope," he remarked, "you'll see it is focussed on Spragge's Farm."

I adjusted the eyepiece and found that I could make out every detail of the house. Almost could I see the handle on the front door so powerful was the instrument. But though I kept my eye glued to it for fully five minutes I saw no sign of life. The place was deserted: presumably Mr. Spragge was dealing with the arnica, and the mysterious sleeper still snored.

"When you're ready, Peter," he said, after he had had a look himself, "we might stroll along past friend Granger's place. I'd like you to cast an eye on his preparations."

I was ready, and so we once more took the road. A short ten minutes' walk brought us to our destination, and assuredly Hugh had not exaggerated when he called it a prison. The wall was about ten feet high, and constituted a fairly formidable obstacle in itself. But what made it practically impassable was the arrangement of steel spikes on the top. They faced in all directions: and each one was about two feet long. There was no gap anywhere: they continued over the massive wooden gates that formed the entrance. And by standing away from the wall I could see the top story of the house inside:

every window was guarded with iron bars as Hugh had said.

"The gentleman certainly seems to resent intrusion," I remarked, and even as I spoke a small two-seater went past us and stopped outside the gates. A young man was driving it, and by his side was an extremely pretty girl. For a time they sat in the car looking somewhat dubiously at the prospect confronting them : then they both turned round and looked at us. And after a moment or two the man got out and came over to us.

He was a cheerful looking youngster with a snub nose and freckles, and when he spoke he had a perfectly charming smile.

"Excuse me," he said, "but is either of you Mr. Granger?"

"Not guilty," remarked Hugh. "The gentleman you're after is inside the fortifications."

"I say," he went on a bit awkwardly, "you'll understand I don't want to be rude, or any tripe of that sort, but what kind of a bird is he?"

"Why do you ask?" said Hugh.

"Well—er—the lady with me has taken on a secretarial job with Mr. Granger. And dash it all, this bally place looks like an inebriates' home."

"It's not that as far as I know," said Hugh. "But frankly I shouldn't call it the sort of household that I'd like a girl I knew to go to."

"You hear that, Pat," he sung out. "This gentleman thinks the show is a dud."

The girl got out of the car and came and joined

us. Though usually of an unobservant nature, I noticed that there was a ring on her engagement finger, and with the acumen of Sherlock Holmes I arrived at what turned out to be the correct solution.

"Can't help that, Freckles," she said calmly. "Dud or no dud, I've had fifty of the best out of the old bean and that's that."

"You could send the money back," he said doubtfully.

"Easily, little bright-eyes," she laughed, "if I had it to send. Unfortunately all that remains is twelve shillings and fourpence halfpenny."

"That's a bit of a snag," he admitted. "But look here, Pat, I don't like the smell of this place at all."

"Nor do I," she agreed frankly. "But what can I do?"

"Can you tell me anything about this gentleman, sir?"

He turned again to Hugh with a worried look on his face.

"Practically nothing, I'm afraid," said Hugh. "He came here some years ago, and had all these affairs erected round the house. He calls nowhere and sees no one, and the only other occupants of the house are a man and his wife."

"There is a woman there then. That's good."

The youngster looked vaguely relieved.

"But may I ask exactly how you came to hear of this job?" said Hugh to the girl.

"Quite easily," she smiled. "I had my name

down at a bureau in London for secretarial work. Ten days ago I went in to find if anything was doing, and the woman who runs it offered me this. It might have been anybody else, only I happened to be the first. And the terms were so very good that I jumped at it. Five pounds a week, and fifty on acount."

"Ten days ago," said Hugh thoughtfully, glancing at me, and it was clear what he was thinking. If this girl had only heard of it then the offer must have been made before the appearance of the lights on the Marsh.

"Have you any idea what your work is to be?" went on Hugh.

"Not the slightest," she answered. "Presumably an ordinary secretarial job."

Once again Hugh glanced at me: then he lit a cigarette.

"Well, as I told this gentleman," he remarked, "it's not the sort of house I'd choose for a rest cure. But I may be wrong: I've never been inside myself. Only there is one thing you ought to know."

And then very briefly he told her about the mysterious signals from Spragge's Farm. She listened in silence, but the result was a foregone conclusion. Her mind was made up, though Freckles did his best to dissuade her.

"Can't you possibly chuck it, Pat?" he said earnestly.

"How can I, you mut?" laughed the girl. "I tell you I've spent the fifty quid."

"And I'm overdrawn," he muttered. "Hell!"

"Look here," began Hugh and I simultaneously.

The girl gave us both a delicious smile.

"Sweet of you both," she said. "I know just what you were going to say. But I couldn't dream of it. After all this old bird can't eat me. I shall be all right, Tom: don't you worry."

"But I *do* worry," answered the youth. "So would anybody who saw what sort of a house it was."

"Go and press the bell, my pet," she said firmly. "It's little Patricia for the shore. Go on, you ass: we can't stand here in the road all day."

He went over reluctantly and did as he was told, and suddenly Hugh spoke.

"Look here, Miss——?"

"Verney," said the girl.

"Mine is Drummond: and this is Peter Darrell. What I was going to say was this. My house is the next one to this—about half a mile away towards Rye. Now everything may be quite O.K., but in case—only in case, mind you—it isn't, it will help you to know that we're near at hand. So one or other of us will make a point of being here between two and three each day. Of course it's quite on the cards that you'll be able to take a walk: in fact, if I were you I'd insist on it. Then if anything crops up you can come and tell us. But if by any chance he keeps you inside or makes you stop in the garden, and you want to get at us, just write a note, put it

in an envelope with half a brick inside and bung it over the wall. You can spot the place—close by the gate, and we'll be here to get it."

"Thanks most awfully," said the girl gratefully, "though I'm quite certain it won't be necessary. Oh! my goodness, what an awful looking man!"

The peephole in the gate had opened suddenly, and staring through it was the man who I placed at once as the pugilistic servant. He was certainly not a prepossessing sight as his narrow eyes took us in in turn, and the girl's exclamation was very natural. Suspicion was in every line of his face, and it was not until he saw Hugh that his expression cleared.

"This lady," said Hugh, "has come to do secretarial work for Mr. Granger. Presumably you are expecting her."

The man made no reply, but stared up and down the road. Then at last we heard an iron bar clang and the gate opened just sufficiently to let him through.

"Come quickly," he said in a harsh voice. "Mr. Granger expects you, but we had forgotten your coming."

"My trunk is in the car," said the girl. "Get it, please. Don't touch the typewriter: I will carry that myself."

"Pat: I don't like it." Freckles made one final, despairing attempt. "Can't you possibly get out of it?"

"I can't say that I like it very much myself,

Tom," she said quietly, "but I'm going through with it for all that."

The man, with the trunk on his shoulder, stood in the open gateway beckoning to her urgently.

"So long, old son," she said with a smile. And then turning to Hugh she held out her hand. "Between two and three: I'll remember."

She took her machine out of the car, and the iron bar clanged to inside.

"Damn it," began Freckles, "she oughtn't to have gone. She——"

He paused suddenly, and at the same time I felt the flesh at the back of my scalp begin to tingle. For from inside the wall there came the deep-noted baying of a hound. It rose and fell, in a snarling roar of incredible ferocity: then as suddenly as it had begun it ceased, and only the faint noise of rattling bars could be heard.

I looked at the boy: he was as white as a sheet. And the next moment he had sprung forward and was pounding with his fists on the gate.

"Pat," he shouted, "Pat. Are you all right?"

Came her answer, faint and a little tremulous.

"It's all right, Tom. It's locked up."

For a while we stood there looking at one another, whilst the colour slowly came back to his cheeks.

"By Jove! that gave me a shock," he said at length. "I ought never to have let her take this filthy job," he added savagely.

On Hugh Drummond's face there appeared his habitual cheery smile.

"My dear fellow," he cried, "from the little I know of the adorable sex, the question, as they say in Parliament, did not arise. Miss Verney had determined to take the job, and that was that. Don't you worry: we'll look after her."

"I suppose you're right," said Freckles gloomily. "Anyway, I'm going to put up at the pub here till I'm certain she's all right."

For a moment Hugh hesitated, and I could see he was summing the boy up.

"Look here," he said after a while, "don't bother about a pub. Come and put up with me."

"Do you really mean it?" He stared at Hugh doubtfully. "I mean—dash it—you hardly know me. You don't even know my name."

"I'll trust you not to steal the spoons," laughed Hugh. "But it would be an advantage to know your name."

"Scott," said Freckles. "Tom Scott. And it's really most awfully good of you. I'd love to stay with you if you don't mind."

"Shouldn't have asked you if I did," said Hugh. "Let's get into that bus of yours and push back to the house."

"It may take a bit of time to start her," said the proud owner. "I picked her up cheap."

At the end of five minutes his prophecy had proved correct. Acting under instructions, I had pulled out a wire and received a severe electric shock: Hugh had stamped on a button, causing a loud explosion and a discharge of grey smoke

through the radiator. But finally she commenced to fire on at least two of the four cylinders and we started, the driver's face wreathed in a complacent smile.

"The steering is a bit dicky," he explained as we missed a milestone by an inch. "Wants knowing. Nearly took a tramcar coming over Vauxhall Bridge this morning."

"Do you mean to say," gasped Hugh, who was precariously clutching at the sides of the dickey, "that you drove this abom—this affair out of London?"

"Rather," said Freckles. "Why not?"

"To the left here," muttered Hugh feebly. "And for God's sake don't kill the cat. She has maternal duties to perform at the moment."

A frightful crash occurred in the bowels of the machine, and we came to a halt.

"When the brakes don't act, I put her into reverse," explained Freckles, and Hugh nodded weakly.

"I no longer have any fears for Miss Verney," he remarked. "Her perils at present are as nothing to driving out of London in this machine. However, young fellow, we'll have it pushed round to the garage and then we must have a little talk. Because there are one or two things you've got to get into your head."

He led the way into the house, and we followed him.

"I'll show you your room afterwards," he said to Scott. "But after that motor drive I want

a nerve tonic. Help yourselves, you fellows: it's all on the sideboard."

We took our drinks outside and sat down.

"Now I suppose I'm right," began Hugh, "in assuming that you are responsible for the ring on Miss Verney's finger?"

"That's so," said Freckles with a grin. "We fixed it a month ago, but since neither of us has a bean the outlook is a bit grim."

"You've got plenty of time before you," laughed Hugh. "However, just at the moment we'll leave your matrimonial prospects. You heard what I said to your fiancée about those lights on the Marsh, didn't you?"

"Rather," cried the boy. "What's the game do you think?"

"That," said Hugh, "is exactly what Darrell and I had decided to find out. We still propose to find out, but now you and Miss Verney have come into the picture."

"I wish to heaven she hadn't," said Scott gloomily.

"If she hadn't you wouldn't have either," remarked Hugh. "And we shouldn't be sitting here drinking a whisky and soda and having this talk. But she did and there's no more to be said about it. Now let me say at once that I do not believe she is in any danger, so you can set your mind at rest over that. But I do believe that she's in a house where some pretty funny doings are going to happen in the near future. It's obvious that her boss is terrified to death of

something, though what that something is we know no more than you. But we propose to have a dip at finding out to-night."

"How?" cried Scott eagerly.

"I don't know whether you heard me mention Spragge's Farm. If you look through that telescope you'll find that it is focussed on it. And that is the house from which the lights have come. It therefore looks as if there was a connection between it and Mr. Granger's terror, which has only arisen since the signal was given. This afternoon Peter and I, by a little subterfuge, got as far as the front door, but we couldn't get any farther. However, it was enough to prove that there is someone else in the house beside Spragge and his wife, because we heard the blighter snoring. To-night we propose to investigate again, and you can come too if you like."

"If I like," cried Freckles joyfully. "Lead me to it."

"But on one condition," said Hugh quietly. "There seems to me to be every prospect of a bit of fun, and fun is too hard to come by to run any risk of having it spoiled. If you come in with us, Scott, you have got to do as you are told. No fancy tricks of your own or anything of that sort—do you get me?"

"Absolutely," answered the other. "I'll do just what you say."

"Good," said Hugh. "Now come here, and let me feel your muscle. Not too bad. Got it cranking that infernal contrivance of yours, I sup-

pose. Anyway, don't forget the golden rule—if you've got to hit, hit first."

"I say you really are a priceless pair," said Freckles ecstatically.

"We may get a bit of sport," said Hugh casually, and then his eyes narrowed suddenly. "Isn't that a car, at the turn-off to Spragge's Farm?"

He went to the telescope and focussed it.

"A big yellow one, Peter," he said. "There's a woman in the driver's seat with a man beside her. And leaning over the gate talking to them is our Mr. Spragge himself unless I'm much mistaken. Now I wonder if they've got anything to do with it. Hullo! they are turning round, and going back towards Rye. Going like hell into the bargain. Come on, let's hit the Bentley. We might spot something."

"A Bentley," sighed Freckles. "Indeed and in truth the Lord is good. And incidentally, Drummond, if it's any good to you at any time, I'm used to driving the breed."

"Good," said Hugh. "It may come in handy."

We fell into the car, and he let her out. He drove, as he did everything else, magnificently, and in four minutes we struck the top of the hill leading down to Rye. Now as I say, Hugh had trodden on the juice, and yet, roaring up the hill towards us was a big yellow car driven by a woman with a man sitting beside her. And another in the back seat. I had a fleeting glimpse

of a beautiful, rather scornful face bending over the wheel, and a man with a small pointed beard sitting beside her: then they had flashed past.

"See which way they go, Peter," sang out Hugh, braking hard.

"They've turned off towards your house," I said.

"And towards Granger's," he answered, swinging into the entrance of a house to turn. "By George! they must have travelled."

"An Isotto straight twelve," remarked Freckles casually. "But you've got the legs of them in this. Oh! if Mother only knew what her baby boy was doing instead of sitting in Prodom and Peanut's office, the old girl would pass right out."

"You are a reprehensible young devil," chuckled Hugh as we started up the hill again. "But the girl at the wheel, Peter, was undoubtedly a pippin of the first order."

And as from a great distance I heard the voices of two adorable ladies in the Hermitage at Le Touquet wondering how the dear lambs were enjoying their golf.

We swung past the entrance to Hugh's house, and then he slackened speed a little.

"No good looking as if we were racing them," he said. "And if they've got anything to do with it—— By Jove! Peter, they have."

The yellow car had stopped at the entrance to Granger's house. The occupants were still sitting

in it, and were apparently studying the place. But as we passed they all three stared at us.

"Don't look round," said Hugh quietly. "Though I'm afraid we've committed a tactical bloomer. Do you think they spotted us as the car they met on the hill?"

"The chauffeur bloke at the back did," said Freckles.

"Damn!" said Hugh. "However it is done now. We'll go back to Rye by another route. Now I wonder where that bunch come into the picture. In fact, I wonder the hell of a lot of things."

CHAPTER III

IN WHICH WE COME TO SPRAGGE'S FARM BY NIGHT

THE Dolphin Inn at Rye is almost too well known to need description. It stands halfway up a steep cobbled hill in the centre of the town, and to its hospitable doors come all sorts and conditions of men. Tourists, artists, golfers—all may be found there—discussing everything from the history of the Cinque Ports to the Putt that Failed on the Last Green. Of old, when the sea lapped round the foothills of Rye, and in later years too, it was a well-known haunt of smugglers, as Hugh had said. Many a cask of old brandy: many a roll of silk had come in through the front door, which the most drastic search by preventive men had failed to reveal. There were stories told of secret passages, and sliding panels by means of which the Excise men were outwitted; but in the present year of grace the only sliding panel in evidence is the one through which the barman hands out the necessary.

It was half-past six when we entered the lounge hall, having left the car at the bottom of the hill. Two old ladies were sitting in one corner immersed in guide books, whilst another was occupied by an elderly clergyman. There was plenty of room for us, but Hugh went straight through to a small room which led off the main hall.

"The only untouched part of the hotel," he remarked. "This room is as it was when the place was built."

Nearly the whole of one end of it was occupied by a huge fireplace, in which as the guide book put it, "it was the custom on special occasions to roast an ox whole." The special occasions presumably were when a particularly good haul of contraband had successfully eluded the coast-guard men. On each side of the fireplace the wall consisted of a sort of scroll-work, long since blackened by the smoke. The shelves were filled with pewter—some valuable, but for the most part modern stuff. And perhaps the most interesting thing in the room was an old map worked in embroidery, showing the country in 1723. Even as late as that the sea was very nearly up to the outskirts of Rye, and almost the whole of Romney Marsh was covered with water.

"Looks a bit different, doesn't it?" said Hugh, studying it idly. "Where we dotted old man Spragge one this afternoon was a bally lake. There's where his farm is, Scott," he went on. "And that is our destination to-night. By Jove!" he added with sudden interest, "that must be Granger's house. I'd no idea it was so old. A convent: that accounts for the wall round it."

"Naughty girls—the nuns," said Freckles. "Do you know the story . . ?"

But we never heard this bright particular gem, because at that moment two men came in, one of whom hailed Hugh with a shout of joy. He

wore a Guards tie, and his face seemed vaguely familiar to me.

"You old blighter," he cried. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Hullo! John James," said Hugh. "How's yourself? You know Darrell, don't you?"

"I met you once in the pavilion at Lord's," cried the newcomer, and then I placed him. He was whisky or beer or something, and rolled in money. Sir John Jameson, Bart., was his name, and he had recently come into the title. Moreover he had a big place somewhere in Kent.

"This is Scott," went on Hugh. "Sir John Jameson."

"This undoubtedly calls for a drop of the old and bold," said John James. "By the way, this is Piggy Heythrop, who suffers from the delusion that he can beat me at golf. Waiter—five martinis. Well, old lad—what are you doing down here?"

"I've rented a house for the summer called Bay Trees. Principally because there isn't one."

"The devil you have," cried the other. "Why, man, that house used to belong to my governor. And the one next door as well. Look here, Hugh, we've got back to Laidley Towers: you and your lady wife must come over and stop."

"Hold hard a moment, John," said Hugh. "You say the next-door house used to belong to you. Which one do you mean?"

"Temple Tower. Used to be a convent. The old man sold 'em both about twenty years ago.

Personally I was rather sorry about Temple Tower. It's got a very interesting history. I wonder who has it now."

"A very eccentric individual," said Hugh. "By name of Granger. He's barricaded the place like a prison: put two-foot spikes round the top of the wall, and bars on every window. He's got a menagerie in the garden, and any caller is examined through a hole in the gate before he is let in. It would take a cross between a monkey and a mongoose all its time to get in, let alone a human being."

John James stared at him thoughtfully.

"What an extraordinary bloke," he remarked. "Doesn't sound as if he was all there. Still I bet I'd penetrate the fastness: once, that is, I'd negotiated the wall."

"What do you mean?" said Hugh sitting up with a jerk.

"I told you the place had belonged to us," said the other. "Well—it used to be a convent."

"I know that," said Hugh. "Just seen it marked on the map."

"And the nuns, bless 'em, though forbidden to receive male visitors through the front door got away with the goods through the back. There's an underground passage leading from an old crypt in the garden which runs into one of the cellars."

"Are you certain?" cried Hugh.

"Of course I am, old boy. Mr. Monk, having said his little piece in the crypt, toddled along the passage to pay his respects to the lady of his

choice in the house. Why, we've got an old plan of it hanging up in the hall at Laidley Towers."

"Have you ever been along this passage, John?" demanded Hugh.

"Can't say I have," admitted the other. "As a matter of fact, it's not quite as plain sailing as it sounds. You see . . ."

"How much did you beat him by?" said Hugh suddenly. "We must have a game one day, John."

"What's that?" stammered the bewildered baronet. "I—er . . ."

"How are the links playing, John? Must be a bit dry, I suppose."

And it was then I became aware that someone else had entered the room. It was the bearded man who had been sitting by the girl in the car. Hugh went on calmly talking golf: John James, though still looking slightly dazed, followed his lead, until Heythrop, happening to look at his watch, gave a startled exclamation.

"Good Lord! John—it's nearly half-past seven."

"The devil it is," cried the other. "We must go, Hugh. Got the most ghastly collection of county bores dining. Look here—I'll come over and see you to-morrow sometime."

"Splendid," said Hugh. "We might have a four ball."

He followed them into the hall, and under cover of some desultory conversation with young Scott I took stock of the bearded gentleman.

He was a good-looking man of his type, but the type was not one that appealed to me. His features were aquiline: his mouth full and red under the carefully trimmed beard. His clothes were perfect—rather too perfect, and though they carried the unmistakable stamp of an English tailor, in some strange way they served to accentuate the fact that the man who wore them was not an Englishman. His hands were beautifully kept: his pearl tie-pin was a little too ostentatious. In fact, the man was overdressed: he didn't fit into the picture. He gave the impression of the exquisite hero in musical comedy.

He looked up suddenly, and found my eyes were fixed on him.

"A very interesting part of your country," he said suavely.

"Most," I answered shortly, feeling a little annoyed at having been discovered staring at him.

"And this inn certainly belies the terrible reputation enjoyed by your country hotels abroad," he went on politely.

"A reputation which I fear is thoroughly deserved," I answered as affably as I could. After all, there was no good showing my feelings, though I found myself disliking his voice even more than his appearance. It was oily and sleek—if a voice can be sleek: and underlying it was another quality which for the moment I could not spot. Then I got it—it was cruelty: I could imagine the man opening his flat gold cigarette

case, and extracting one with the utmost deliberation, just in order to keep his victim on the rack a little longer so that he might gloat over him.

We talked on casually, and all the time I was wondering what nationality he was. Italian possibly, though his English was faultless. The girl, in the two quick glimpses I had had of her might well have been Italian. And what was their relationship to one another? I knew that he was studying me also, though our conversation was confined to banalities: studying young Scott too with his heavy lidded eyes.

"Golf," he was saying, "is a game which I unfortunately have never had the opportunity to master."

"Master!" broke in Freckles with a laugh. "You're in the same boat as a good many other people."

"So I believe," he said politely. "And yet it seems to the outsider that it should not be hard to hit a stationary ball with some degree of precision. Dear me—what's that?"

From outside had come a sudden crash, followed by a loud "Damnation," in Hugh's voice. I rose at once, followed by Scott, and went into the hall. Standing outside the door was Hugh staring upwards; at his feet, smashed to pieces on the cobble, was a heavy chimney-pot.

"Confound it," he exploded when he saw me, "this cursed thing only missed me by about a foot."

Attracted by the noise the boots had appeared,

and two or three of the guests were staring out of the window.

"Very sorry, sir, I'm sure," said Boots scratching his head. "Such a thing ain't never happened before, not to my knowledge."

"And if it happens again somebody is going to get a thick ear," said Hugh grimly. He was still staring upwards and his mouth was set in a hard line. Then with a little shrug of his shoulders he entered the hotel.

"I must apologise for my language," he said with a smile to the clergyman.

"My dear sir," said the cleric benignly, "a mild expletive is surely permissible under the circumstances. Why, if that heavy thing had hit you on the head it might have stunned you."

Hugh gave a short laugh.

"As you say, it might have stunned me," he agreed. "But it didn't. I am going to wash, Peter, and then we might have some dinner."

We followed him to the lavatory, and he carefully closed the door.

"Ever heard of a chimney-pot falling on a dead calm day?" he said quietly.

"What do you mean?" said Freckles looking startled.

"I strolled down to the bottom of the hill to see John off," went on Hugh. "And also to put him wise to one or two things. Then I came back, and was standing outside the door lighting a cigarette. A sitting target, though I must say it never dawned on me that anything of that sort

was likely to happen. But luckily the blighter missed."

"You think someone pushed the thing over deliberately?" cried Freckles.

"I don't think: I know. I saw his shadow move."

"Then why not go and have a look-see," said the boy.

"Because the shadow will have moved a considerable distance by now," answered Hugh dryly. "In other words we'd find nothing, and merely make ourselves look fools. But don't be under any delusions, you fellows: that was a deliberate attempt by someone to lay me out."

"It can't have been the bearded gentleman," I said. "He's been talking to us ever since you left."

"I don't know who it was," said Hugh drying his hands. "But if he, or they, are prepared to go to the length of attempted murder it proves one thing at any rate. We're up against a pretty tough lot. It's all right, young fellow," he went on as Scott's face fell. "This bunch is outside the garden wall: your girl is inside."

But to me privately as we went out, leaving Freckles to the basin, he was not so optimistic.

"We were fools, Peter," he said. "We ought never to have allowed that girl to go inside that house. I'm not frightened of anything happening to her *now*: what I am afraid of is what is going to take place if this lot, whoever they are, do get inside."

"You think that's the game?" I asked.

"Granger is the game," he said. "And if the mountain won't go to Mahommed, Mahommed must go to the mountain. Granger has gone to ground in his house, and nothing short of an earthquake is going to get him out. Therefore to get him, they've got to get into the house. *Voila tout.*"

"We might send her a letter telling her to leave," I suggested.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"From what I saw of the girl," he laughed, "I think she'd tell us to go to blazes."

Young Scott joined us and we went in to dinner. And though Hugh deliberately kept the conversation on outside topics, I couldn't keep my mind off the problem that confronted us. The whole thing seemed so utterly disconnected: that was the trouble. What link bound the bearded man and his companions with the snorer at Spragge's Farm? What was the signification of the red and blue lights? Above all, if Hugh was right, and he was not a man who made mistakes on matters of that sort, who was it who had deliberately tried to lay him out with the chimney-pot? And why?

The bearded man was eliminated, which left of those we knew the girl and the chauffeur. But even granted it was one of them the second question remained unanswered. Why? Even if we had aroused their suspicions by going back on our tracks in the car, their return for it seemed a little drastic.

Another alternative came into my mind: sup-

posing it wasn't them at all? Supposing we had struck some completely new factor in the situation? Again came the same unanswerable question. Why? What had we done—or rather what had Hugh done—to give any possible reason for trying to kill him? The only person who could legitimately feel that way was Spragge, and it seemed well nigh incredible that that worthy should have secreted himself on the roof on the bare chance of laying him out.

From Spragge my thoughts turned to the snorer. He was a possibility. True he hadn't seen us as far as we knew, but Hugh was an easy man to describe. Supposing Spragge had told him what had happened in the afternoon: supposing the man was a criminal and thought detectives were after him, and had determined to try to get rid of them? . . . And then I gave it up: it was obvious that that solution wouldn't hold water. Genuine detectives don't go about the country in racing Bentleys slogging people over the jaw. And further he had no possible means of knowing that we were going to be at the Dolphin.

We were halfway through dinner when the bearded man and the girl entered. She swept past us as if the whole of Rye belonged to her, but her companion paused by our table and nodded to me.

"I must congratulate you, sir," he said turning to Hugh, "on your narrow escape. I was talking to your friends at the time, and the crash was terrific."

"Thank you very much," said Hugh gravely. "It's the worst of these old houses: anything might happen."

"Precisely: anything might happen," agreed the other, and with a bow he passed on to his table.

"Unless I am much mistaken," said Hugh thoughtfully, "the time is coming in the very near future when that gentleman's face will disappear through the back of his skull. He is the type of mess I like not: moreover he is undoubtedly one of the players. So here's to hoping."

We finished our dinner in silence, and it was not until the coffee came that any further allusion was made to the subject. Hugh, I could tell, was trying to puzzle things out in his own mind as I had done, and Freckles—the confounded young scoundrel—couldn't keep his eyes off the girl.

"What's the plan of campaign, Hugh, for to-night?" I asked, after the waiter had left us.

"I've been thinking over it, Peter," he answered, "and I've come to the conclusion that the safest way of tackling it if we want to find out anything, will be to approach the house from the other side—that is from the sea. I figure it out this way. We are obviously under suspicion: it is known that we are taking an interest in Spragge's Farm, in that swab over there all covered with hair, in Granger's house—in fact, in the whole outfit. If, as is more than likely, we are all three seen leaving Rye in the Bentley and taking the road towards Spragge's Farm, the

betting is a fiver to a dried pea that we shall be followed. We'll have to leave the car in the road, and that gives us away completely. So my suggestion is this. There is a road—it's pretty bad, but it will serve—that runs past the golf links and goes down to the sea. True we still have to leave Rye in the direction of the farm, but as long as they don't find the car in the road it doesn't matter. In fact it's rather to the good ; it may help to put 'em off the scent if they think we've gone on towards Folkestone. So we'll leave the car on the sea road, which incidentally peters out into nothing, strike inland on foot, and approach Spragge's Farm from the rear. And after that, it's on the lap of the gods. Ever done any night work, young Scott?"

"What sort of night work?" demanded Freckles.

"Moving about country at night, of course."

"Can't say I have," admitted the youngster.

"Well, keep close to me, and do exactly as you are told," said Hugh. "And pay attention to where you put your clumsy great feet. We'll want silence, and don't forget it."

"Do you think there is a chance of a scrap?" he asked eagerly.

"I haven't the faintest idea," said Hugh. "But I want to avoid one if possible. We want to find out all we can, and not be discovered doing so."

"What time do you suggest starting?" I asked him.

"Let's see," he calculated. "It will be a good hour's walk—perhaps more. Allowing for the car journey—say an hour and a half. So if we leave here as soon as we've finished dinner, we ought to strike the farm about eleven thirty."

He finished his coffee and got up. And for the first time to my knowledge the girl showed herself aware of our existence. Her glance rested on Hugh—coolly and thoughtfully: then I was honoured and after that young Scott. Then she returned to her dinner as if we had been summed up and dismissed, for all the world like a man turning down three horses that had been brought out for his inspection. I said as much to Hugh as we left the coffee-room, and he smiled slightly.

"Bless her heart," he laughed. "I wonder if it was she who tried to anoint my head with the chimney-pot. Incidentally, I wonder what their names are. Presumably they are staying here since she has changed for dinner."

We opened the hotel register, and looked at the last three entries.

Paul Vandali.
Madame Vandali.
Jean Picot.

"H'm," grunted Hugh. "If the names are genuine, they mark the chauffeur down as French, and the other two as Southerners of sorts. Possibly Italian. However, we shall doubtless find out in time. Now you fellows, smoke if

you want to, because once we start walking it will be a case of no lights."

We strolled down the hill, and I noticed that Hugh was glancing from side to side. But the road seemed deserted, and we got into the car without having seen a soul.

"One hour at this time of night ought to be enough to make Folkestone," he said as we got in.

"Did you see him, Peter?" he asked me as we drove off.

"Not a sign," I said surprised. "Where was he?"

"In the shadow of that big warehouse place. Mr. Jean Picot for a tozzy. I couldn't make out his face, but there was someone there crouching against the wall."

"Then let's hope you put him off," I remarked.

The night was a perfect one for our purpose. Already dark, it would be darker still, as the moon was not due to rise till three o'clock. A faint breeze was blowing, and in the distance the light of a signal gleamed like a great red star. For the first half mile the road ran dead straight: then came a T bend. To the left lay the road to Folkestone and to the proper entrance to Spragge's Farm: to the right lay our route to the sea. And so it was with some surprise, after what he had said at dinner, that I found Hugh swing left-handed when we got there.

"There are no flies on those birds," he said briefly. "And on these marshes you can see the headlights of a car for miles."

He drove on for perhaps another mile until he came to a small track leading off the road. Then he switched off the headlights, and turned the car.

"I'm taking no chances, Peter," he said as we drove slowly back with only the small side lamps alight. "We're up against brains this trip."

We got back to the bend without having met anyone, and took our proper road. He was still driving without headlights and so our progress was slow. Gradually the road got worse and worse, until the murmur of the sea on the shore to our right told us we had struck the coast. To our left lay the sand dunes, and Hugh continually peered in that direction as if looking for some landmark.

"There's a path somewhere about here which leads a little way into the dunes," he explained. "It will give us a bit of cover for the bus. Here it is."

We swung along it, and after going about twenty yards he pulled up. The car was almost hidden from the road : certainly at night no one passing along would be likely to spot it. And there we left it, and struck inland on foot, Hugh leading. At first the going was bad : the low sandhills so beloved of golfers exercise no attraction for the mere pedestrian. But after a while it got better, and the loose-shifting soil gave place to firm reclaimed ground.

We walked in silence ; only the harsh cry of a stray night bird broke the stillness of the night. In the distance the lights of Rye glittered from

the hill : in front of us darkness save for an occasional gleam from some cottage.

Suddenly Hugh paused, and we came up with him. He was standing on the edge of a dyke—one of the many which intersect the Marsh in all directions. But for some reason or other this one seemed to interest him.

"I've never seen one so broad," he explained. "This is more like a miniature canal. However, it seems to be leading in the right direction. We may as well follow it up."

We walked on once more, sticking to the bank, until once again he paused, this time with a low whistle of surprise. A boat was in the water completely covered with a tarpaulin, and even in the darkness it was easy to see that it was no ordinary row-boat. He scrambled down, and lifted up the covering : then he came up and joined us again.

"A motor-boat and a powerful one," he said thoughtfully. "Now I wonder if that is also part of the jigsaw. Or is it just a perfectly harmless machine belonging to some perfectly harmless individual?"

"Useful for smuggling," I suggested.

"Quite," he answered. "Or as a line of escape. Do you notice, Peter, that the dyke narrows and becomes congested with weeds from here inland? Whereas the other way presumably it is clear right down to the sea. However, there is no good wasting time. We'll just make a mental note of the fact that it is here."

We pushed on again still keeping to the edge

of the dyke. And now there were more signs of life. We saw sheep in a field to our left, and also a few cows.

"This is probably Spragge's ground," said Hugh. "We must begin to go warily. Hullo! Is that our friends, I wonder?"

In front of us about a mile away we could see the headlights of a car. It was moving fast in the Folkestone direction, and for a while we stopped and looked at it. At one moment it seemed to be coming straight towards us: then as the road jinked we saw only the reflection of the lights travelling sideways across our front. And so we stood until the glare had almost faded away to our right: almost but not quite. For Hugh had been correct in his tactics: it was our friends as he had predicted. The reflection became stationary in the sky: shifted as the car turned, and then became again the headlights returning on the same road. And to me there seemed something strangely ominous in that powerful silent light searching the country for us, with people who we even now knew would stick at nothing, in the car behind it. Was the girl driving again, with Paul Vandali sitting beside her; or were other unknown people on the trail too?

"Let's hope that has put 'em off the scent anyway," said Hugh as the light disappeared in the direction of Rye. "It's lucky we took the sea road."

Once more we struck out along the bank of the dyke. We walked in single file with Hugh leading

and young Scott in the centre. Sheep were becoming more plentiful now, and suddenly Hugh came to an abrupt halt.

"There's the house," he said in a low voice as we joined him. "Straight in front of us."

It lay there black and silent. No chink of light came from any window: no sound broke the stillness save the faint creaking of the branches of a tree. A little to one side lay the outhouse we had noticed that afternoon and suddenly Hugh clutched my arm.

"There's a light filtering through a crack in the wall, Peter. In the outhouse. Don't you see it? And, by Jove!" his grip tightened, "we're not the only prowlers abroad to-night. Somebody passed across the light just then."

We stood there motionless, scarcely breathing, staring into the darkness. I could see the light distinctly now, shining probably through the hinge of the door. But no further shadow blotted it out: the other nocturnal wanderer, whoever he was, was lying up in the darkness now like us.

"It is the possibility of a dog that I'm afraid of," whispered Hugh. "It might have been one of the household who is walking about."

Cautiously, a step at a time, we crept nearer. And after a while I became conscious of a curious noise. It would last for perhaps ten seconds: then cease abruptly. And after a pause it would be repeated. Hugh heard it too: I could just see the outline of his face beside me peering ahead trying to locate it.

For the third time it came : but on this occasion an unmistakable sound of splintering occurred in the middle, and one part of the problem was solved. Someone was sawing wood, and I almost laughed. If after all our elaborate precautions we were to find old man Spragge cutting up tomorrow's firewood the jest would be rather rich.

As we drew nearer it was obvious that the sound came from the outhouse : saw, pause, saw, pause. And whoever it was who was producing it he certainly wasn't working overtime. The pauses grew longer, the noise shorter, and when at length we reached the wall of the building the sawing seemed to have ceased altogether. From inside came the occasional sound of a person moving about, and once some tool fell with a metallic clang on the floor.

We were some two yards from the chink of light, and I could see that Hugh was looking keenly all round us. It was obvious what was worrying him, and I, too, searched the darkness intently. If we had seen the other watcher in the light from the door, he, in his turn, would be able to see us if we peered through. And that was the last thing we wanted. If he was a member of the household he would give the alarm : if he was one of the opposing side we should have given ourselves away completely. And so for five minutes we stared into the night, but without success. No trace could we see of him : he seemed to have vanished completely.

At last came Hugh's whisper in my ear—

"We'll chance it, crouch low," and inch by inch he edged his way to the door. I followed close behind him on my hands and knees, with the youngster just on my heels. I could hear his excited breathing, and truth to tell I was getting well worked up myself. Were we going to see anything inside, or would it turn out to be a false alarm?

Very gradually Hugh straightened himself up until he could see through the crack. For a moment or two he stared and I saw a look of amazement appear on his face. Then he went on and I took his place.

The scene was an astounding one. The illumination came from half a dozen candles which stood on a rough carpenter's bench. A saw and some tools were scattered about, but it was the worker himself who fascinated me. He was sitting on an overturned box, and in the course of my life I have never seen a more bestial face. He was clean shaven save for a short moustache. His mouth was a little open as he worked, and the light shone on a row of yellow teeth, from which two were missing. His nose was flattened, and a great red scar ran down one cheek from the temple almost to the chin. His eyebrows were bushy, and once when he happened to glance up I saw his eyes glaring with a kind of animal ferocity. He paused in his work, too, at that moment and shook both his fists in the air as at some imaginary enemy. And his expression was that of a homicidal maniac.

Never, in fact, unless I had seen it, would I have

believed that any living thing, who bore the outward semblance of a man, could have presented such an utterly devilish appearance. He fascinated me, so that I stared and stared until Hugh nudged me in the ribs. And then only did I force myself to look away from him at the work he was doing.

At first I couldn't make it out. He had beside him two or three slats of wood each about a foot long, two inches broad and an inch thick. There was an augur hole at each end of the slats, and through these holes he was passing two ropes. And then it suddenly dawned on me: the man was making a rope ladder. I looked on the floor at his feet, and saw the ends of the top ropes were attached to a canvas sack about the size and shape of a bolster. And at last I got it, but not before Hugh had pulled me forcibly away, and performed the same office on young Freckles, who had nearly given the whole show away by an audible gasp when he had looked in.

"Damn it," muttered Hugh irritably, "you blokes might have been getting your money's worth at a peep-show in a circus."

We were sitting on the ground some sixty yards away from the house, under cover of a hedge.

"I saw all there was to see in two seconds," he went on. "And for the love of Pete don't forget we're not the only people here to-night."

"What was that horror doing?" said Scott. "I've never seen such an awful looking specimen in my life."

For a moment or two Hugh hesitated.

"Well, young fellow," he said at length, "I fear that his present mission in life is fairly obvious. When you see a man making a rope ladder it is safe to assume he wants to climb something. And when you further see a big canvas sack at one end of the rope ladder, it is not difficult to spot what it is he wants to climb. That sack will just lie nicely between the spikes on Granger's wall, and will anchor the top of the ladder into the bargain. And when he gets to the top he can sit on the sack, throw the ladder down the inside of the wall, and there you are."

"You mean to say," stammered Freckles, "that that beast, that damned murderous swine, is going to get into Temple Tower? With Pat there? Not on your life, Drummond. If you won't go for him now, by God, I will!"

He had scrambled to his feet, and I could hear his quick agitated breathing.

"Sit down and shut up," said Hugh curtly. "I am not going for him now, and he'd eat you with one hand. Sit down, youngster," he went on kindly. "I guess it is a bit of a shock to you, but we've got to do a bit of thinking. No good has ever come yet of barging in like a bull in a china shop, and whatever may be that beauty's intentions in the future, he's perfectly safe where he is at present."

CHAPTER IV

IN WHICH THE NECESSITY FOR SPARKING PLUGS IS PROVED

AND so for the next quarter of an hour we sat there discussing the thing in whispers. The feeling of incongruity, almost of the ridiculous, in three grown men prowling about Romney Marsh at night, which I at any rate had experienced, even if only slightly, had disappeared : we were face to face with reality, and pretty grim reality at that.

That this horrible, bestial individual was preparing to get into Temple Tower was obvious. And that his reason for doing so was not to pay a polite call was equally obvious. That it had been Granger who was in his mind when he had paused in his task and shaken his great fists in the air I was sure. But beyond that there was still much that was obscure. We had learned something of vital importance it was true, but the one ray of light we possessed only seemed to make the surrounding darkness more impenetrable.

Was this brute sitting in the outhouse the man we had heard snoring ? Was he the man who had flashed the red and blue warning to the house on the hill ? Whose was that other shadowy form that we had seen cross the light through the door ? And most curious of all, what was the connection if any between this animal man and the Vandalis ?

Were they working in conjunction, or was the maker of rope ladders playing a lone hand?

That his object was to get at Granger was, as I have said, clear. And as Hugh said, if Granger knew that this specimen was after him his precautions were comprehensible. But was it only his life they were after, or was there something concealed in Temple Tower that they wanted as well?

"I give it up," said Hugh at length. "We don't know enough yet to say. But our evening has not been wasted: we've got another player taped all right. And as I don't think we can do more, I suggest home and hitting the hay. The only thing I wish is that we could spot that other bloke, but it is hopeless on a night like this."

But we were destined to have one more glimpse of him. Even as we rose the door of the barn opened, and the ladder maker stood there framed in the light. We had only seen him sitting before; standing up he seemed more horrible than ever. He was a short man, but his arms were abnormally long, and he looked for all the world like a huge misshapen ape. Then he turned back, blew out the lights, and as he did so we crept nearer the house. It was just possible we might learn something, and the night was yet young.

He opened the door and went in, and shortly afterwards a light shone through the curtains of one of the rooms facing the road. As luck would have it the window was open, and as we crept along the side of the house we heard voices.

"It is cursed foolishness, I tell you," came in Spragge's snarling voice. "You've done it twice now, and it is bound to attract attention."

"I agree with Spragge." It was Mrs. Spragge speaking. "Those two men this afternoon—what were they doing except trying to find things out?"

And then I, at any rate, got the shock of my life. For the voice that answered them was soft and musical. It was as if one had suddenly discovered some priceless gem of beauty in a filthy pigsty. At first, in fact, I could hardly believe that it was the bestial monstrosity speaking.

"*Mes amis,*" he said gently, "it is for the last time. My ladder is nearly finished; soon, very soon the moment will come. It matters not to me what these two Englishmen suspect: maybe it is just idle curiosity on their part. It is no offence against your laws to flash a red light and then a blue across the Marsh. There is nothing here which all the world may not see. But those lights—they are seen by him. And he knows what they mean. And his soul is sick with terror because he knows that death is near. Moreover he knows"—and now the voice grew, if anything, more gentle and sweet—"that that death will not be quick. Not for him the swift bullet that shatters the brain. But a death of lingering agony—a death which makes him welcome death as a lover welcomes his mistress. My arms will be about him, and when I have torn him limb from limb my hands will squeeze the last fleeting

breath from his body. Ah ! yes—he knows. Once more shall he see the lights, to remind him that I am still here. And then we will go to bed."

"You talk too much," grumbled Spragge. "And don't you forget, Mister, what you promised us after it was all over."

"I shall not forget," said the other contemptuously. "Now turn out the light."

Came a sudden darkness, and we crouched there enthralled. Had it been said blusteringly, had the voice been what one would have expected from such a being, half the effect would have been lost. But those soft melodious, gentle words carried with them an icy thrill, impossible to set down on paper. And whatever might have been Granger's crime in the past, I felt sorry for him if this man ever got hold of him.

Suddenly there came a sharp hissing noise, and a bright red light shone out. And then things happened quickly. I had a brief glimpse of a man silhouetted in the light not twenty yards away : of the beast-faced ladder maker staring out above our heads, and then the light went out. He too had seen the man, and with a grunting cry he hurled himself through the open window and crashed past us so close that we could almost have touched him. For a while we heard him blundering round in the darkness, searching for the other watcher. The instant he had jumped past us Hugh, fearing that Spragge might join in the search, had risen and led the way round the house in the direction away from the front door.

Which was just what did happen, and for some ten minutes, hidden behind a small tool shed we listened to the two men as they searched. But it was useless—the mysterious unknown had disappeared completely—and at length they gave it up and returned to the house.

"Couldn't find an elephant on a night like this, let alone a man," came Spragge's growling voice. "It's your damned fault anyway, playing with those fool lights."

"My friend," said the other, "the man was there anyway. The light merely discovered him."

"Probably that swine who was here this afternoon," said Spragge, and then their voices died away as they got round the corner of the house.

The front door shut with a bang, and still we stayed on. Was anything further going to occur? Would the ladder maker still insist on flashing his signal across the Marsh, or would he follow Spragge's advice and give it up? Apparently it was to be the latter, for shortly after a light appeared in one of the upper windows. Then that, too, went out, and the house was in darkness. The charming trio had retired for the night.

"Come on," said Hugh. "I think we've seen all we are likely to to-night."

We skirted along by the footpath until we reached the dyke, and though it seemed to me that the need for precaution had gone, I noticed that Hugh still moved with the utmost caution. And it wasn't until we had put a good half mile

between us and the farm that he relaxed his vigilance.

"There is an air of efficiency about this bunch," he remarked, "that behoves us to be careful. Spragge and his spouse are negligible: even the handsome bloke making ladders seems to have his intentions cut and dried. But it is the others."

"Do you think there were more than one there to-night?" I said.

"Ask me another," he answered. "There may have been half a dozen for all I know. On the other hand, the man who showed up in the light, and the man who crossed the outhouse door may be one and the same person. But one thing is cleared up anyway: he and that horrible brute are not working in collusion."

"It is possible," said Freckles, "that he is a detective who is after the other swine."

"As you say, young fellow, it is possible," agreed Hugh. "The trouble is that there are the hell of a lot of things that seem to me to be possible. But one thing is quite definitely certain. We've got to get that girl of yours out of Temple Tower in the near future. She's not in any danger to-night—so there is no need to worry at the moment. But in view of the prospective caller, I think she will have to have a telegram recalling her to London."

"I've never thought of such a specimen," said Freckles. "He made one positively sick to look at."

"You noticed his slight accent, Peter," said Hugh. "And the way he started, *Mes amis*. The whole darned bunch are foreigners."

"What I principally noticed was his voice," I said. "A voice like that from such a man is the most astounding thing I've ever known."

We walked on briskly. Now that the thing was over for the night the thought of bed was becoming increasingly attractive, especially as our long spell without movement at the farm had made us all a bit chilly. The motor-boat loomed up as a welcome halfway landmark, and shortly after we left the dyke and struck off right-handed.

"Sometime," said Hugh, "when we've got a spare moment, we might follow that dyke down to the sea. Though it seems pretty obvious that it must be clear. Also we might make a few discreet inquiries concerning the boat itself."

At last the car hove in sight, and with a sigh of relief young Freckles fell into the back seat.

"Thank the Lord no one has pinched that," he remarked sleepily. "Every garment I possess is full of sand, and—Good Lord! won't she start?"

Most emphatically she wouldn't start: moreover the engine, when Hugh pressed the self-starter, was making the most peculiar noise.

"What the devil has happened?" he said grimly. "Has she been tampered with?"

He got down and opened the bonnet: then he gave a low whistle. He had flashed an electric torch on to the engine, and by its light, propped up inside, I saw a piece of paper.

"This is no business of yours, Captain Drummond," he read out slowly. "There are quite enough people engaged in it already without you butting in. This is only a small warning and punishment for what you have done up to date: next time, if you should be so ill-advised as to let there be a next time, you will be hurt."

"Is that so?" said Hugh softly, and then he began to laugh. "Stung, you fellows, stung good and proper. We're either here for the night or we've got to walk."

"What's happened?" demanded Freckles.

"Our friendly correspondent, my lad," said Hugh, "in addition to embarking on a literary career has amused himself by removing all the sparking plugs. And cars have grave difficulty in running without sparking plugs."

"Haven't you got any spare ones?" I asked.

"One—possibly two. But not six. Damn it—I'm not a walking garage."

"Where is the nearest garage?" cried Freckles.

"Rye," said Hugh laconically. "And even if we got there the chances of waking them up are remote."

We looked at one another blankly—the significance of this new development was overshadowed for the moment by the physical annoyance of the thing. We were all tired, and here we were, four or five miles from anywhere, planted with an immovable motor-car.

"Well, there's only one thing to be done,"

said Hugh at length. "One of us must go to Rye and throw bricks at the first garage until someone does appear on the scene. Let's toss: odd man out goes."

"It would be me," said Freckles resignedly, as we looked at the coins. "Well, chaps, when my bootless body is found dead in a ditch, tell Mother that it wasn't the effect of alcohol."

We watched him go off down the road, and Hugh grinned.

"A good youngster," he said. "Very good."

And then he grew thoughtful again, studying the paper he held in his hand. The words were printed in block capitals, so there was no handwriting clue to be obtained. The message was in pencil, evidently done on the spot, as the paper had been roughly torn out of a notebook.

"Can you remember, Peter," he said at length, "whether we mentioned the fact that we were coming to Spragge's Farm to-night when we were in the Dolphin? I know we talked about it at dinner, and at my house, but on neither of those two occasions could we have been overheard."

I cast my mind back.

"I think we did," I answered. "I think it was mentioned when we were in that small room looking at that old map. But there were only the three of us there at the time."

"We might have been overheard from the hall," he remarked.

"As far as I remember only the parson and

those two elderly women were in the hall. Anyway what is the great idea?"

"Nothing much," he admitted. "But what I was wondering was whether it was a pure fluke that this car was found here by whoever wrote that message? Or did the other side *know* we were coming?"

I saw his point, but I could no more supply the answer than he could. As far as we knew we had not been overheard, but only as far as we knew.

"It's becoming increasingly obvious," he went on, "that a considerable number of people are involved in this. That man we saw silhouetted in the light was neither Vandali nor the chauffeur. Of that fact I'm perfectly certain. He was too tall for the first, and too slight for the second. Further, I don't think that it can have been he who wrote this note, unless by some extraordinary chance he was actually lying up in these sandhills when we arrived. Even then it takes time to remove six sparking plugs, and write a note. Yet he was at Spragge's Farm before us."

"Incidentally, how did he know your name?" I said.

"That's easy," he remarked. "It's written on a plate on the instrument board, even if he didn't know it before. But if my suspicions are right he did know it before, just as he knew our plans before. The key to this mystery, Peter, or at any rate one of them, lies in the Dolphin Inn. The little episode of the chimney-pot is all part and parcel of it."

"But look here," I objected, "if that's the case: if they knew we were coming here why did that car go along the other road? Of course, it's possible that it wasn't their car at all, but some other people who had taken the wrong road."

"And another thing is possible too," he said quietly. "That it was their car, and when they drew blank on the main road they knew we must have come along this one."

"But that disposes of your own theory that they knew our plans," I cried.

"Does it?" he said. "I don't agree. They knew part of our plan, but not all of it. They knew we were coming to Spragge's Farm, but they did not know we were coming by the sea route."

"I don't see," I began densely.

"Lord! man, it's plain," he cried. "If, that is to say, my supposition is correct, and the finding of the car was not a fluke. Where did we discuss approaching the Farm from the sea? In the dining-room, where we *know* we were not overheard. Where did we discuss the main idea of going to the Farm? In the little room."

"Where," I interrupted, "we know with even greater certainty that we were not overheard. Confound it all, old boy, we three were alone in the room. The only people within range were the padré and those two old trouts knitting. You surely don't suspect one of them?"

"Every man who wears a dog collar isn't of necessity a parson," he said obstinately.

"Well, anyway," I remarked, "it can't have

been the cleric who bunged the chimney at your head, because he was in the hall the whole time."

"Perhaps you're right, Peter," he said, but it was quite obvious he didn't think so. However, he said no more, and after a while, I began to doze in the sand. I calculated that it would be daylight before Freckles could possibly be back, and sleep seemed better than an insoluble argument. In fact, the only thing that mattered as far as I was concerned was that, fluke or no fluke, the darned blighter had successfully kept me out of my bed.

It was the sun's rays shining direct on my face that woke me. Hugh was still sitting beside me, and as I stirred he looked round.

"I hope to heaven nothing has happened to that youngster," he said in a worried voice.

I was wide awake in an instant: that possibility hadn't dawned on me up till then.

"I ought to have gone myself," he went on. "He's but a baby. I'll never forgive myself if he's come to grief."

He rose and stared down the road, and I joined him. Visibility was poor, as the ground mist had not yet lifted, and after a while he began to fidget uneasily.

"I've got a good mind to go and look for him," he said. "It's three hours now since he started."

"But surely," I said, "they wouldn't be such fools as to lay him out. They don't want to attract attention to themselves."

"I don't think they are going to kill him and

leave him in a ditch," he grunted. "But we're up against an absolutely unscrupulous bunch, Peter. And whoever removed our plugs must have known one of us would go for more. What easier than to lie up—then dot that boy one as he passed? Just to make him talk when he came to. He's loyal all right—but don't forget his girl is there. And that would tend to spoil his nerve."

"Look here, Hugh," I said seriously, "we'll have to hand this thing over to the police. All joking apart, it's got a bit beyond our form. As you say yourself, that girl is inside Granger's house."

"I suppose you're right, Peter," he said regretfully. "But it does seem cruel hard, doesn't it? The point about the whole thing though, is this. What are we going to say to the blighters? After all, as far as I can see, the only actual offence that has been committed as yet, is the removal of our plugs. And we don't know who did it. Making a rope ladder is a perfectly legitimate occupation: flashing red and blue lights is not a criminal offence. The person to go to the police, if anyone, is Granger himself. And he won't. It's not all as easy as it looks, you know."

I was silent: what he said was undoubtedly true. Even if we showed them the note written by the unknown, our case was decidedly thin. More than likely they would regard it as a stupid practical joke, and in addition to that, view us with considerable suspicion for our share in the night's activities. At the same time one could not get

away from the feeling of responsibility with regard to the girl, and I could see that Hugh was not too happy in his mind about it either.

"It is this way as I see it, Peter," he went on after a while. "And honestly it is not because I want to keep this bit of fun and laughter to ourselves that I say it. If we tell the police what little we know about this show up to date our connection with it automatically stops. We pass out of the picture. Now the police are trammelled by all sorts of rules and regulations : in other words they are not free agents. They have to obtain warrants and things of that kind before they can move a step. Would it not therefore be better to keep matters in our own hands at any rate until we know a bit more? Then if we think it necessary, or if there seems to be the slightest danger threatening that girl we'll tell them all we know."

"You darned old hypocrite," I laughed. "Have it your own way."

And once again we fell silent, staring down the road. The mist was lifting gradually, though it was still impossible to see any distance.

Out to sea was a tramp homeward bound, and the occasional wail of a syren showed that the fog was not confined to the land.

And suddenly Hugh heaved a sigh of relief ; a figure trudging wearily along had come in sight. It was Freckles with the parcel of plugs clutched in his hand.

"Hell take it," he said as he came up. "I've

had the most frightful time. An old woman in a nightcap bunged a bucket of water over me in one garage: thought I was tight or mad. No one could understand why I wanted six of the damned things. I've walked about eighteen miles."

"Did you see anyone on the way, young fellow?" asked Hugh.

"Not a soul," grunted Freckles. "Except a tramp asleep in a ditch. Lucky devil—I very nearly joined him."

He got into the car, and lay back wearily.

"Home, John, home. I'm just about done in."

"Right ho! my son," said Hugh. "You shall be between the sheets very soon now."

He tightened up the last plug, and closed the bonnet.

"Hop in, Peter," he cried. "Taking everything into consideration I'd sooner get past the coastguard station before they are all awake. What the dickens is that?"

We had gone over a bump in the road, and an extraordinary metallic clang had come from behind the car. He got out, and I followed him. And when we got to the back of the car, for a moment or two neither of us spoke. There are times when the power of speech fails one.

Hanging on to the luggage grid, attached by a short piece of string, were our six original sparking plugs. And in the middle of them was another small note.

"Your plugs, I believe," read Hugh, and just then Freckles' face appeared over the hood.

"What did you say?" he spluttered.

"Keep calm," said Hugh weakly. "Remember your aged mother."

"You mean to tell me," remarked Freckles, in a choking voice, "that those plugs were there all the time?" He swallowed once or twice, and over the next minute I will draw a decent veil. Even Hugh listened in admiration to the flood of rhetoric that poured forth, and he is no mean artist in that line himself.

"Laddie," he said gravely, when Freckles paused for breath, "I had no idea that such language was known to anyone under forty."

"I would put him," said Freckles broodingly, as the car drew up at the house, "on a hard concrete surface. And then I would cover him all over with sparking plugs. And then having pegged him down I would take a roller of medium weight, and passage it backwards and forwards over his vile body, pausing occasionally to jump on his stomach with hobnailed boots. Yea—thus and more would I do to that offspring of Beelzebub. And if any sparking plugs were over I would ram them down his mouth with a sledge-hammer."

"Run away to bed," laughed Hugh and Freckles departed muttering horribly. And not until his door had closed did Hugh grow serious again. He wanted less sleep than any man I've ever known, and my immediate need of it had been met by the two hours I had had in the sand dunes. And now as we stood by the dining-room window

staring over the Marsh I could see his brain was busy once more.

"What was the idea, Peter, of that little jest?" he said at length. He was holding the note in his hand as he spoke. "Was it in reality what he says here—a small warning and punishment?"

"Why should you think otherwise?" I asked.

"This morning," he said, in an unusually quiet and serious tone of voice for him, "I had a very queer sensation. I got it first of all when you were asleep. I suddenly became convinced that there was someone else there. I saw no one: I heard no sound. Nevertheless the feeling was strong on me that we were not alone: that somebody else was watching us. In those sand dunes, of course, you could hide a battalion of infantry. Footmarks disappear as soon as they are made. It was hopeless to try and explore, but for all that I believe there was someone there."

"And if there was," I said, "what do you deduce from it?"

"That the object of the plug episode was a little deeper than appears on the surface: that there was more in it than to make us temporarily annoyed and inconvenienced. Mark you—I don't know. It is all surmise on my part, and surmise moreover based on what may be a false start. There *may* have been no one there at all. But if there was then I think that the main object of the thing was to enable the watcher to take stock of us considerably more closely than any of the opposing side have been able to up to date."

"Assuming for the moment that you are right," I said, "have you any theory as to who the watcher was?"

He shook his head.

"None at all. I've got no theories on the thing at all. But one thing I do know, though you will probably call me every kind of an ass for saying so. I feel it instinctively. There is someone in this show who is infinitely more dangerous than that specimen making the rope ladder, or than the Vandalis. I sense his influence behind them. Whether he is the leader or not, or whether he is quite separate I can't tell you—but he's there. Further, I believe that it was he who first of all tried to out me with the chimney-pot, and having failed there decided on other measures and lay up this morning to study us."

"The man we saw at Spragge's Farm," I suggested.

"Possibly: possibly not. Time will show. But the solution lies at present in the Dolphin, and when you turn in I'm going to see what there is to be seen there. Probably nothing, but there's no harm in having a try."

"I'll come with you," I said, but he refused to allow me to.

"I can do without sleep," he remarked, "and you can't. Go and turn in, old boy, and I'll have a bit of shut-eye this afternoon."

I went up to my room and slowly undressed. In front of me lay the Marsh, bathed in the early morning sunshine. The mist had quite gone: only

a haze over the sea still remained. For a while I stood by the open window staring at Spragge's Farm, but there was no sign of life. Then with a feeling that the whole thing was an unreal dream I got into bed. And the next thing I knew was the sound of Hugh's voice.

"Wake up, Peter. It is half-past twelve. Time for a spot of lunch."

"Did you find out anything?" I said as I scrambled out of bed.

"Not very much," he answered. "I went over the list of visitors, but got no farther. There is, however, one thing I noticed that gives one to think a little. The Vandalis' room is Number 18. Now Number 18 is on the first floor. It stands at the corner of the passage, and is directly above the little room leading off the hall. Do you see the significance?"

"Not at the moment," I said. "We weren't talking loud enough to be overheard through the ceiling. Besides Vandali was in the room."

"But the lady was not," he retorted. "Think again, Peter. Number 18 undoubtedly possesses a fireplace, though I haven't been into it to see. The flue of that fireplace must lead into the main one which communicates with the huge chimney in the room below—a chimney which would act as a glorified megaphone. It is a point anyway to bear in mind."

He left me to finish dressing, and ponder over this fresh development. It undoubtedly was a point to bear in mind ; and if he was correct it accounted

for a great deal. More than likely words spoken in the little room below, even in a low tone, would be heard perfectly distinctly by anyone listening-in just above the chimney.

"John is coming to lunch," he said as I joined him below. "Moreover, he is bringing the plan of Temple Tower. And that is another point, Peter, which is going to have a bearing on the situation. The possession of that plan is a very big asset in our favour. For without it, as far as I can see, no one is going to get inside the house. Our friend of the Marshes may get inside the grounds, but there he will stick."

He swung round as a car pulled up at the door.

"Here he is. Morning, John. Got the necessary?"

"I have not," said the other coming into the hall. "Look here, Hugh, you didn't play a damn fool practical joke on me last night, did you?"

"Not that I'm aware of," he answered. "Why?"

"You remember that plan I was telling you about—the one of Temple Tower?"

"I do," said Hugh, sitting up suddenly. "You were going to bring it over this morning."

"I know I was. And I haven't, for a very good reason. Someone broke into Laidley Towers last night, and stole it."

CHAPTER V

IN WHICH WE COME TO THE WOOD AT TEMPLE TOWER

FOR a while we stared at him in silence, and at that moment Freckles came down and joined us.

"You're certain, John," said Hugh at length, "that it isn't hidden away in a drawer somewhere?"

"Of course I'm certain, old man," answered the other. "The darned thing was framed, and it used to hang in a corner of the hall. When I went to get it this morning it wasn't there. I sent for the butler, and he swore on his Bible oath that it was there yesterday. Besides, there is more to it than that. It appeared that when we were at dinner last night, a man called to see me. One of the footmen answered the door, and told him that I had a party. The man looked all right apparently, and when he said that he would wait and that I was not to be disturbed on any account, the footman showed him into a room off the hall. Then the darned fool forgot all about him for some time. As soon as he remembered he went back to the room, and found that the bird had gone. He made a hurried survey, and when, as far as he could see, nothing was missing, he decided that his best policy was to say nothing about it. Of course when I found out what had happened, I gave him hell. He was very contrite about it: assured me again and again that the man had

looked like a gentleman : that he had driven up in a car and all that. But when it came to describing him to me it was hopeless. He gave a description that would fit a hundred people. And all he could really say was that he would know him again if he saw him."

"It just bears out what we were saying, Peter," said Hugh thoughtfully. "Where were we discussing the plan? Why, in the little room again. And we were overheard there. It stands to reason. An old plan of Temple Tower is of no earthly value to anybody, unless they are connected with this business. A pony to a tanner it is the woman. By the way, John, I suppose it wasn't our bearded friend who visited you?"

"Not unless he'd shaved off his beard. Even my mutton-headed poop would have noticed that amount of face fungus. But there is one rather important point, which I forgot to tell you yesterday. The plan was framed, and on the back of it is some writing. And that writing gives the clue to the secret entrance. The plan, of course, shows where it is approximately, but without the writing at the back you can't get in."

"And you haven't any idea what is written there?" I asked.

"Not the remotest. Dash it, old boy! I was only about eleven years old at the time."

"As you say, John, that is very important," said Hugh. "Because what it boils down to as far as I can see is that unless the bloke that pinched it takes it out of the frame it is useless to him."

"That's about the long and the short of it," agreed the other.

"Gosh! You fellows," cried Hugh, "I'd give something to see a little daylight in this. Anyway, let's go and gnaw a bone."

And all through lunch we argued it backwards and forwards. Was it the man we had seen at Spragge's Farm who had stolen the plan, or was it, perhaps, Jean Picot the chauffeur?

"That's a point, John," said Hugh. "Go and ring up your place and find out if the footman can say what sort of a car it was the man came in. See if he remembers the colour: that might help."

But again we drew blank. The car had not been left at the front door, and the man had no idea on the subject.

"The more I see of it, Scott," said Hugh as we finished lunch, "the more do I think that the first real daylight we shall get is from Miss Verney. I want you and Peter to be there from two to three this afternoon, in case she gets a note over the wall. I'm going to turn in for a couple of hours, and then this evening our work really begins."

"The Marsh again?" asked Freckles.

"No, young fellow—Temple Tower," said Hugh gravely. "If anybody gets inside that wall we're going to follow."

And so two o'clock found Freckles and me ensconced in the little wood which lay opposite the front gate. Hugh had turned in: John James had returned to Laidley Towers with the definite

intention of getting some kit and then coming back to the house. As he pointed out, it was his plan, and if there was any fun and laughter going begging, he was going to have a dip at it.

Not unnaturally, the boy was a bit on edge, and I certainly didn't blame him. All that we could see of the house was the tower : the rest of it was hidden by the wall. And in the hot, drowsy afternoon the whole place looked more like a prison than ever. Even to me it was so gloomy as to be depressing, and I hadn't got my fiancée inside.

We hardly talked at all, and when we did for some reason or other, we found ourselves whispering. Save for the drone of countless insects, the silence was absolute : even the birds seemed stricken dumb. Once a farm waggon creaked slowly by, the driver half asleep : but except for that the road was deserted. And after a while Freckles began to doze.

I suppose I must have followed his example, because I distinctly remember that I had a brief vivid dream of the beast-faced man at Spragge's Farm. And then, quite suddenly, I was wide awake. Something had moved not far away, and the sound had roused me. I sat up and glanced at my watch : it was a quarter to three. I looked at Freckles : he was sleeping peacefully. Then I stared round me : what was the noise I had heard ?

The undergrowth was dense : I could see nothing. But that noise which had sounded like the cracking of a twig must have been caused by something. Or somebody. And then—I cannot

explain it—I began to be aware of a peculiar sensation, a sensation I had never experienced before. Someone was watching me ; I knew it.

Once again I stared all round me ; once again I saw nothing save the brambles and trees. But the feeling grew on me, till it amounted to a certainty. I was being watched. Back to my mind came Hugh's words of that morning : he, too, had felt the same sensation in the sand dunes. And after a while I could stand it no longer : I got up. Still no sound : still no sign, but the feeling remained. The silent watcher was still there. I took a few steps forward, and there came the sudden crack of another twig. And now I knew I was right : we were not alone in the wood.

Absurd I know, and I am almost ashamed to admit it, but for some reason or other the most unreasoning panic began to get hold of me. And only by taking a firm pull at myself did I remain where I was. In the middle of a summer's afternoon, for a grown man to be frightened in an English wood was utterly ridiculous, and yet the plain fact remained that I was. The noise had seemed to come from the direction in which I was facing, and acting on a sudden impulse I plunged into the undergrowth. There was nothing—nothing at all. A bird startled by the noise flew away chattering angrily, but of anyone human there was no sign. I took a few more steps, peering in every direction, with the same result. And then, suddenly, I heard Frecklès calling me, and his voice was urgent.

"Darrell! Darrell! Where are you?"

"Here I am," I answered. "What's the matter?"

I found him sitting up, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand.

"I must have been dreaming," he said slowly. "And yet I could have sworn I was awake."

"What did you think you saw?" I asked.

"It is a most extraordinary thing," he said, "but I thought I saw a black figure through those bushes over there. It was all black, standing between those two trees. Just at first I thought it was you, until it moved: then I saw it wasn't. And then it suddenly vanished."

"Let's go and have a look," I said: and together we walked over to the two trees. But there was no one there, and though we stood listening intently we heard no further sound. The wood had relapsed into its drowsy silence once more.

"A trick of the light most probably," he said. "Some shadow or other."

"Shadows don't come and go," I answered. "As a matter of fact for the last five minutes I've had the impression that we were being watched."

"But, damn it," he cried, "if there really was someone there, what was he doing in that extraordinary rig. He was absolutely black, and a most peculiar shape."

"What do you mean by a peculiar shape?" I said.

"I'm blowed if I know what I do mean," he answered, scratching his head. "But he didn't look normal."

"When you say black," I persisted, "do you mean he was a nigger?"

"No; he didn't seem to have a face at all. He was just a black outline." He gave an irritable laugh. "Confound it, Darrell, I'm not tight. And I *know* I was awake. What the deuce is in this wood?"

"It's a bit too big a proposition to explore at the moment," I said. "I think we'd better return to our observation post; we don't want to miss the letter if it comes."

We went back to our original position and lay down again. And for the next ten minutes while we waited I have no hesitation in admitting that I frequently found myself looking over my shoulder into the shadows behind us. What was this mysterious being that I had heard, and Freckles had seen?

After a while I glanced at my watch: it was ten minutes past three. And I was on the point of suggesting that we should give it up, when something skimmed over the wall and fell in the road, not two yards from where we were lying. It was the letter, and it had hardly reached the ground before Freckles had it in his pocket.

"Pat," he called out in a low voice. "Pat."

"Hullo!" I just heard her answer from the other side.

"Are you all right, darling?"

"Yes, quite. Look here, Tom . . ."

But whatever she was going to say we missed, because at that moment Freckles glanced up the road. He let out an urgent "Shut up," and bolted back under cover beside me.

"The Vandalis," he muttered, and even as he spoke I heard the roar of their car in the distance. It drew up almost in front of us, but fortunately in such a position that we could see the gate. The woman was driving, and we wormed our way a little further forward in order to see better. The whole thing was evidently cut and dried beforehand, and a direct frontal assault was the plan. Vandali got out of the car, looking even more overdressed than he had in the Dolphin, walked over to the bell and rang it. Then he lit a cigarette, and coming back to the car, stood leaning against it and talking to the girl. Once I thought he must have seen us, because he stared perfectly straight at me, and seemed to pause for an instant in his conversation. But he gave no further sign, and a few moments later, the hole in the gate was opened and Gaspard looked out.

Vandali turned round, and for a while he and the girl stared at him in silence. Then Vandali spoke.

"Is Mr. Granger at home?"

"That's as may be," retorted the other. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"My name doesn't matter. But I wish to see your master."

"Well, he don't wish to see you, nor anyone else."

He made as if to shut the hole in the gate, but Vandali stepped forward.

"Wait a minute, my friend," he said. "You know who is down there on the Marsh, don't you?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," said Gaspard hoarsely.

"Don't lie: it is foolish," said Vandali. "You know that you are found at last—or rather your master is. And you know what that means."

Gaspard moistened his dry lips with his tongue.

"Tell me who you are?" he repeated.

"As I said before," answered Vandali, "it doesn't matter who I am. But go and tell your master that someone who knows everything is outside and wishes to speak to him. And tell him further that he need have no fear."

For a while the man hesitated: then he slammed and bolted the panel of the opening and we heard his steps departing up the drive.

"I wonder," said Vandali thoughtfully to the girl, "if it will work the trick. We hit the mark all right over Marillard. Still it is only guess-work."

"Guess-work that is a certainty," she answered impatiently. "My dear Paul, look at the house, look at the precautions he has taken against anyone getting in. Of course it is the man."

"I suppose you are right," he agreed. "Anyway, we can but try the bluff."

He lit a cigarette, and stood leaning against the car.

"And if the bluff doesn't succeed?" she remarked, "what then?"

"I see nothing for it," he said, "but the police."

The panel suddenly opened again, and he swung round. And framed for a moment in the hole in the gate was an unpleasant shifty-eyed face. The owner himself, I decided, and evidently Vandali had come to the same conclusion.

"Mr. Granger, I believe," he said quietly.

But if he expected any further conversation he was doomed to disappointment, A querulous voice said: "I don't know you: go away," and then the panel slammed to again.

"Wait a moment," called out Vandali. "I know you don't know me, but I know you."

"Go away," shrieked the voice from the other side of the wall.

"Listen to me, you fool," snarled Vandali, losing his temper, "or it will be the worse for you. Unless you consent to see me, and discuss things, I will put the police on to you."

A peal of cackling laughter was the only reply, and I saw the girl put her hand on Vandali's arm and whisper something.

"Look here, Mr. Granger," he said more calmly, "we'll give you a day to think it over in. To-morrow at about this time we will return. And then I advise you, for your own sake, to see me."

But there was no reply, and after a time, with a shrug of his shoulders, Vandali got back into the car. And the girl was just leaning forward to press the starter, when a noise like a young explosion occurred at my elbow. As I pointed out to Freckles afterwards, he might have controlled himself for another half second, but he merely retorted that half a second can be longer than an eternity if a fly goes up your nose. Anyway, the bald fact remains that the uproar of Freckles' sneeze literally shook the countryside. And the girl drew back from the self-starter, and then they both stared straight at us.

"Botanising?" said Vandali quietly.

"No. Only studying the habits of the lesser carnivora," burbled Freckles. "I say, laddie, he didn't seem to like your face, did he?"

Vandali got out of the car, and slowly crossed the road.

"Spying, I see," he remarked curtly.

Freckles grinned amiably and sat up.

"Blessed if it isn't my old friend from the Dolphin," he said. "And what are we doing in the fragrant countryside this afternoon?"

"May I ask what *you* are doing lying concealed here?" said Vandali angrily.

"Tush! Tush!" said Freckles, "and likewise pish, pish! I must buy you a little brochure on Manners for Men with Beards. Can you advance any reason why I and my dear old friend Abraham de Vere Potbelly should not lie in the verdant hay, studying the beauties of nature?"

"Look here, my young friend," said Vandali quietly, "I would strongly advise you not to play the fool with me."

"God forbid, my dear old lad of the village," cried Freckles earnestly, "that I should ever play anything with you. I should hate to. I don't think you'd make at all a suitable companion for me. In fact I know my aged mother would object most strongly. 'Percy,' she would say, 'have nothing to do with that rude man. Give him the raspberry at once.'"

The veins were beginning to stand out on Vandali's forehead, but he managed to control himself, and turned to me.

"Since this boy seems partially insane," he said, "might I ask you to be good enough to tell me what the great idea is?"

"What the devil has it got to do with you?" I said curtly. "As far as I know we have as much right to lie in this wood, as you have to drive your car along the road."

"I see," he answered slowly. "Well, I hope you have profited by your eavesdropping."

"Immensely, thanks," said Freckles. "And now don't let us keep you any more. I would fain resume my studies of nature."

"Come along, Paul," cried the girl imperiously. "You are only wasting time."

"Madame," said Freckles tragically, "you wound me to the very core. Surely, surely, to engage in playful badinage with one of my engaging countenance cannot be regarded as wast-

ing time. But I do wish you'd get him to cut the grouse moor on his face. That's given him the once-once," he continued with a grin as the car drove off. "But there is no doubt, laddie, that the girl is a decided pippin."

"I wish you could have controlled your nose," I said irritably. "Damn it! People in Rye must have heard you."

"It was a bit of a break," he admitted. "Still I do not see that it has done much harm. We've had a pleasant little chat, and I suggest that we now ooze back to the house, and read Pat's letter."

There certainly seemed to be no object in staying where we were, and I was on the point of agreeing, when suddenly the panel in the gate was cautiously opened, and Granger again looked out. We were standing in the middle of the road, so it was useless to try and conceal ourselves. He stared at us with utmost hostility, but Freckles, completely unperturbed, seized the opportunity.

"Good-afternoon," he cried cheerily. "Do you mind telling Miss Verney that I am here. Scott is my name."

"Are you friends of Captain Drummond?" answered Granger, with a look of relief replacing the anger.

And then there occurred the most extraordinary thing. Granger's expression changed suddenly. And it changed so suddenly that we could do nothing but stare at him blankly. His jaw dropped, and a look of terror appeared on his face, such

as I have never seen before or since. For perhaps a second he stood there : then the panel clanged to.

"What the devil is the matter with the man?" stammered Freckles.

"It was not us," I muttered. "He wasn't looking at us."

We swung round quickly, and peered into the wood, the same thought in both our minds. And this time I, too, saw it—a great black shape that seemed to flit between the trees until it vanished. For a moment or two we stood there undecided, then we pulled ourselves together and gave chase. But it was hopeless. Once I thought I saw it in the distance between two trees, but when we got there, there was nothing. And after a while we gave it up and returned to the road mopping our foreheads.

"So it wasn't my imagination after all," said Freckles. "What is it, Darrell?"

"Ask me another," I answered. "But whatever it is it put the fear of God into our friend Granger. I've never seen a man look more terrified in my life.".

"I wonder if it is that swine from Spragge's Farm masquerading about in disguise," he said as we strolled back to the house. "What defeats me is that it seemed such a rum shape." He stopped, struck with a sudden thought. "I suppose it *is* human, isn't it?"

"Good Lord, man!" I cried irritably, "there are enough complications in this affair already

without introducing a bally ghost. Besides, ghosts do not step on twigs and break them."

"That is so," he admitted. "But it really was the most extraordinary object. It didn't seem to have a face."

We walked on in silence until we reached the house. Up to date every single hour seemed to have produced a new development, and I fully expected to find that something more had happened in our absence. But in that I proved to be wrong. Hugh was taking his ease in a long chair on the veranda, and assured us that nothing had disturbed his siesta. He hoped that we were not as hot as we looked, whereat we cursed him for a lousy knave, and demanded beer in tankards. But all his air of laziness vanished when we began to tell him what had happened.

"You are absolutely certain about this peculiar thing you saw in the wood?" he said. "But, of course, you must be. You couldn't both have imagined it. Very strange: very strange indeed."

He lit a cigarette thoughtfully.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you are not right, Scott," he went on, "and it is not our friend from Spragge's Farm."

"Whose name would seem, from what Vandali said, to be Marillard," I put in. "But my impression of the thing we saw in the wood was that it was considerably taller."

"Anyway," said Hugh, "whether it is him or not, we've arrived at two definite conclusions. Granger is frightened of it, and he is not frightened

of the Vandalis. Therefore it would seem that it and Vandalis are working separately. Am I right or wrong?"

"Don't ask me," grunted Freckles. "The whole thing at the present moment is completely above my form. But there is one point that sticks out a bit, and that is the fact that the Vandalis know about Marillard, and that Granger is frightened of him. So that if the 'it' is Marillard, even though they may be working separately, the Vandalis are using him as a weapon for their own ends."

"Life is certainly a trifle complicated," murmured Hugh. "However, let us hear what your perfectly good girl has to say on the matter."

"Great Scott! She has written a three volume novel," said Freckles as he opened the letter. "Er—and the first paragraph, chaps, does not seem to bear directly on the subject."

"You surprise me," said Hugh gravely. "The first paragraph may therefore be omitted."

"It certainly will be," laughed the other. "Here is where she really gets going."

He settled himself comfortably in his chair.

"This is the most amazing household," he began. "I'll start at the beginning and try not leave out anything. The first excitement occurred the instant the gate was shut—and you heard it. The dog, I mean, if such an animal can be called a dog. It is the size of a calf, and I suppose it saw a stranger. Instantly it hurled itself against

the bars of its cage, roaring—there is no other word for it—with rage. Its eyes were red, its great fangs were showing, and the front of the cage shook so much that I feared it might give way.

"'What an awful brute,' I said to the man who had opened the gate. His name is Gaspard, and he and the dog are a pretty pair.

"'You're right,' he said. 'And he runs loose at night. Don't forget that.'

"He flung open the front door, and then I really thought for a moment or two I had come to a madhouse. A nasty-looking little man, who subsequently turned out to be my employer, was coming downstairs as I stepped into the hall. The instant he saw me he started shouting, 'Who's that woman? Who's that woman?' at the top of his voice. I stood there wondering whether to laugh or be angry, while the servant man said something to him which seemed to reassure him. At any rate, he came shambling forward, and muttered some sort of an apology.

"'You must excuse me, my dear young lady,' he said, 'but I am a great recluse. My nerves are not all they might be.'

"'So I see,' I answered. 'I presume you are expecting me.'

"'Of course, of course,' he muttered. 'Just for the moment I had forgotten you were coming—that is all. Let me see—you come from Miss Mudge's bureau, don't you? Now you would like to see your room, I'm sure. Gaspard—tell your

wife to show this young lady to her room. And then later we will go into your duties. Tell me, as you came in, did you see anyone outside in the road?'

"'I came with my fiancé,' I said. 'And there were two gentlemen who told us which the house was.'

"I could hardly get the sentence out before he was shouting for Gaspard.

"'Did you see the men?' he stuttered. 'The two men outside?'

"'Only Drummond and a friend of his,' said Gaspard.

"'Who was the friend?' he cried.

"'If you want to know,' I said coldly, 'his name was Darrell.'

"He stared at me suspiciously, and I suppose he noticed I was looking a bit surprised. Anyway, he made an attempt to pull himself together.

"'I don't encourage strangers, Miss . . .'

"I told him my name.

"'Ah! yes, of course. I remember now. No, Miss Verney, I don't encourage strangers. As I told you, I am a recluse, and I keep myself to myself.'

"I forbore to make the obvious retort that no one was likely to object, and he went rambling on, evidently trying to put me at my ease. And then at last the woman arrived, and I escaped upstairs.

"'Mr. Granger seems in a very nervous condition,' I said to her.

"She was a furtive-eyed creature and very uncommunicative.

"'So would you be if you never stirred outside the house,' she muttered morosely. 'Here's your room.'

"She flung open a door, and walked in in front of me. And then Gaspard brought in my box, and the pair of them went out and left me alone. The room was quite comfortable, though the furniture was very plain. And like every other room in the house, there were steel bars over the window.

"I got unpacked, and shortly afterwards the woman brought me some tea.

"'When you've finished, ring the bell and I'll take you to Granger,' she said.

"I noticed the omission of the 'mister,' but said nothing. As a matter of fact, it only confirmed what I'd thought ever since I got into the house, that they were all of much the same class. However, I finished my tea and went off to interview the gentleman. His room is at the top of the house, and is, if possible, more heavily barricaded than the rest. The door is about three inches thick, and you can hardly see out of the window for bars. He was sitting at his desk when I came in, and I took a pew opposite, from which I could study him more fully than I'd been able to up to date. He is the most terrible little man, Tom: perfectly frightful. He is like some kind of insect with a rash on it, and but for the fifty quid I think I should have left then and there.

"However, he started explaining what he

wanted me to do. And after a time I had to stop him: he was so incoherent and rambling that I could not make head or tail of what he was saying. In addition to which he kept popping up to have a look out of the window, until I could have shied the inkpot at his head.

"'You must forgive me, Miss Verney,' he said several times, 'but I have had a great shock just lately.'

"I said nothing, of course, but presumably he was alluding to the signals Captain Drummond was talking about. And quite obviously the man is in a pitiful condition of nerves. However, to get back to the point. After he had hummed and hawed for some time, and told me that he would want me to write letters and that sort of thing for him, he suddenly asked me if I knew anything about jewellery and precious stones. I said I knew very little.

"'I have one or two beautiful bits of stuff,' he rambled on. 'I have been an ardent collector for years.'

"Which, of course, was very nice, but what it had to do with my duties as his secretary was a little obscure. So I brought him back to the point.

"'I should like to know, Mr. Granger,' I said, 'what will be the arrangement over going out. There seemed to be a great deal of difficulty over getting in: I hope it won't apply to getting out.'

"'That we will arrange,' he cried. 'Just at present it would be better, I think, for you to take your walk in the grounds. There are reasons,

important reasons. But one thing, as you value your life, you must not forget—do not go out after dusk.'

"'You mean the dog?' I said.

"'Yes—and other things, too. Soon I hope the danger will be over, but for the next few days do not forget my warning.'

"And then I could not help it: I just had to ask him:

"'Why have you got your house barricaded like a prison?' I said.

"'I have an enemy,' he answered; 'an unscrupulous enemy. He believes I did him a wrong—years ago. As if one could do such as he a wrong. But I'll beat him, I'll beat him.'

"He was literally jibbering in his excitement, and for some time I thought he was going to have a fit. Then the upheaval passed.

"'A vile criminal, Miss Verney: a man debased beyond words.'

"Bearing in mind the speaker, I thought that a bit rich.

"'Do not be alarmed,' he continued, 'if you hear things at night, out in the grounds. You will be quite safe. Well, well, we will finish our talk to-morrow. A letter or two, and your outings. We must discuss them: we must certainly discuss them.'

"And with that I left him. Honestly I do not think the man is quite all there, and as for his remarks about the criminal outside, the man is as crooked as a corkscrew himself. However, it is

past eleven now, and I am going to bed. My dinner was sent up to my room, and I have not seen Mr. Granger again. But an hour ago I heard the most frightful quarrel going on between him and Gaspard, and it sounded to me as if Gaspard was drunk. Anyway, I have locked my door, though, to give the devil his due, neither of them has given me any trouble at all. Good-night : I'll finish this effusion to-morrow, though whether I will ever get it to you or not remains to be seen."

CHAPTER VI

IN WHICH WE COME TO TEMPLE TOWER

"BY Gosh! the old thing has spread herself," said Freckles. "There is a further vast instalment."

"Get on with it," cried Hugh. "It strikes me Miss Verney has her head screwed on in exactly the right way."

"She is not too dusty," conceded her fiancé graciously. "Now this whack of stuff is headed Mid-day."

"Had a perfectly good night," she begins, "though I woke up once with that beastly dog baying at something outside. However, I soon fell asleep again, and did not wake till after eight. All of which matters not: I'll get on with it. I received his majesty's command to wait on him at ten o'clock. Now you know my watch has never been quite itself again since it fell in the river at Henley, and sure enough it had apparently gained about twenty minutes this morning. The result was that little Patricia, with pencil and paper complete, fresh and radiant in the morning sunshine, popped into the sacred room at twenty to ten instead of ten. Not, you would have thought, a very frightful crime, but you should have seen the result. His lordship was kneeling by the side of the fireplace, holding something in his hand. As soon as he heard the door open he

thrust whatever it was back into a recess, which he closed. Then he scrambled to his feet in a fury.

"'I said ten,' he stormed.

"'I thought it was ten,' I remarked amiably. 'My watch must have gained.'

"Then I sat down with paper and pencil, and waited for him to start. After a bit he calmed down and took a seat at his desk.

"'You must make allowances for me, Miss Verney,' he mumbled. 'My health is not very good.'

"'That's all right,' I said. 'It was my fault for coming too soon.'

"And once more I waited for him to begin. At last he got under way, and dictated three short letters—all of them business, and all of them trivial to a degree. Then he stopped.

"'Is that all?' I said.

"'All for this morning,' he answered. 'As a matter of fact, Miss Verney, my correspondence is very small. Being the recluse I am, I know but few people.'

"'If this is a fair sample of a day's job,' I remarked, 'I shall certainly not be overworked. I will go and type these now, and bring them to you to sign.'

"I got up and went to the door and just as I was opening it I heard him muttering in his beard again: there are times when he talks exactly like a man with his mouth full of fish-bones. So I waited for him to get it off his chest, and if you can explain it I shall be glad, for I certainly can't.

"He first of all started on the question of outings. He mumbled and he grunted, and repeated his warning of last night about the immediate future. Then without a word of warning he suddenly asked me if I'd like to go to London. I stared at him blankly and asked him if he meant alone, or was he going, or what.

"'Alone,' he said. 'All alone in a nice first-class carriage.'

"Honestly, Tom, I don't think the man is all there. I half expected him to go on and say something about the pretty puff-puff. However I waited, and let him get on with it in his own way.

"'You see, Miss Verney,' he said for the twenty-fourth time, 'I am a recluse. I dislike intensely going outside my own grounds. And one of the things that I shall wish you to do for me will be to make frequent trips to London on very confidential business.'

"'That seems quite clear,' I said. 'But what sort of business? Because I have got no knowledge of anything except typing and shorthand.'

"'You won't require any knowledge,' he assured me. 'All that I want is a nice-looking young lady whom I can trust implicitly.'

"And suddenly I remembered a thing which Miss Mudge had said when she told me of my being engaged. At the time I didn't think about it, but now it came back. One absolute proviso was that I must look a lady.

"'You see, Miss Verney,' he went on, 'my one hobby all through my life has been acquiring

beautiful things. And recently a relative of mine has died, and left me a wonderful collection of old jewellery. Now this big place, as you will understand, costs a lot of money to keep up, and I fear that, much as I regret it, I shall have to sell some of my things. And that is where I want you to help me.'

"'You mean,' I said, 'that you want me to take them up to London and sell them for you?'

"'That's it,' he cried. 'That is just what I want.'

"'But why not send for a good man from Christies,' I said, 'or a first-class jeweller to come here? I should probably be badly swindled.'

"He shook his head cunningly.

"'No, you won't,' he said. 'Not if you do it the way I say. You see,' he went on confidentially, 'it is like this. If I send for a first-class jeweller to come to me here, and he sees all my collection or even half of it, it stands to reason that he won't give me as good a price as if I sold each article separately. At the same time I obviously cannot ask a man to make fifty different journeys down here and show him the things one at a time. So I want you to make the fifty different journeys up to London. There are scores of first-class jewellers either there or in the big towns like Birmingham and Manchester, and if you go to a different one each time you will get the maximum price for each article. Look, for instance, at that.'

"He produced from his desk a small box, and

opened it. Inside was the most lovely pearl and diamond pendant I have ever seen. The setting was old-fashioned, but even I could realise how valuable it was.

"'Now,' he went on, 'if you took that to a good man, and told him it had been left you by your mother or a relative, I am sure he would give you a thousand pounds for it.'

"'I should think it more than likely,' I said. 'But why bring in the bit about it having been left me? Why not simply say that I want to sell it?'

"'He might want to know how you got it.' he explained. 'And the one important thing, Miss Verney, is that the news should not be passed round among them that a big collection is being disposed of piecemeal. Once that is known, down will go the prices.'

"I suppose he is right, though I don't know much about these things.

"'I had intended,' he went on, 'when I first engaged you for you to start on that side of your duties at once. But now certain things have occurred which render it necessary for you to postpone it a little. So that for a few days, my dear young lady—just for a few days—your duties will not be very onerous.'

"With that I left him, and went and typed the letters. What is the meaning of it, Tom? One thing is perfectly clear: it is not for any secretarial work that I have been engaged. The main part of my job is obviously to sell his stuff

for him. But it all seems so peculiar. Incidentally when I took him back the letters to sign, he was down again on his knees by the fireplace, and he had completely forgotten all about them. Moreover he was furious at my walking in, though I had knocked twice.

"Lunch time—so I will stop. What do you think? It all seems very funny to me."

"And to me," said Hugh thoughtfully, as Freckles folded up the letter. "But not inexplicable, once one thing is granted."

"And that is?" I asked.

"That the stuff to be disposed of is stolen," he answered. "If this collection he talks of was honestly come by, the simplest method by far of disposing of it would be to do what Miss Verney suggests, and have a really good man down from London. Obviously he dare not. So he has hit on this distinctly clever method. If Miss Verney walked into a shop with an ornament such as she mentions, it would arouse no suspicions. It is just the sort of thing she might have been left by a relative. And a good man would give her a fair price for it. If Granger walked into a shop with it they would probably ring up Scotland Yard after one look at his face. And if he took it to an ordinary fence he would get a third of its value."

He rose and began to stroll up and down.

"We are on the line," he said: "I am sure of it, though we are the deuce of a long way from spotting the whole thing. Our friend at Temple

Tower is obviously in possession of a big lump of stolen property which he intends to sell. For that purpose he engages a lady secretary, who without suspicion can get a good price for it. Then suddenly along comes the bird at Spragge's Farm who puts the fear of God into Granger. He is probably a man whom Granger double-crossed, and who is entitled to his share of the swag. So that necessitates Miss Verney's activities being postponed until he is disposed of one way or the other. Does that sound feasible?"

And the more I thought of it the more it did, though, as Hugh said, there were still a lot of unaccountable things. Where, for instance, did the Vandalis come in? Were they also entitled to a share in the stolen property? And, if so, why had Granger not recognised them? And then last, but certainly not least, whose was that mysterious black figure that had flitted silently through the wood, and which inspired Granger with such ghastly terror? Was it the man from Spragge's Farm, or was it yet a further complication?

A sudden exclamation from Hugh interrupted my thoughts. He was standing with his eye glued to the telescope, and the instrument was focussed on Spragge's Farm.

"Activity," he remarked, "on one of the fronts. There is a car standing outside the farm—a thing that looks like a tradesman's van. They are all three of them there, the two men and the woman, and they are putting something into it. By Jove!" he went on excitedly after a moment,

"I believe it is. It is just about the shape. They are putting the rope ladder on board, you fellows. Now the woman has gone into the house, and one of the men has clambered into the back of the car. They're off."

And now it was easy to see the car coming along the track away from Rye, and after a while we lost sight of it.

"I wonder what that signifies," said Freckles.

"It signifies that the ladder is finished," said Hugh gravely. "And it also signifies, if I mistake not, that the game is shortly going to begin in earnest. That car can get to Temple Tower from the opposite direction. Come on: we've got to take the road once more."

"But he surely won't try and climb the wall by daylight?" I cried.

"No: but it is more than possible that he is going to hide the ladder nearer the scene of action by daylight," said Hugh. "And if he hides it anywhere he is going to hide it in that wood. There is no particular hurry because it is going to take that car at least half an hour to get there going by that route. But I think we'll just stroll along and see what happens."

And so once again did we find ourselves lying up in our hiding-place opposite the gate of Temple Tower, only this time Hugh was with us. Moreover I noticed that he, every now and then, threw a glance over his shoulder into the gloom of the wood behind, as if he expected to see that mysterious black figure. But on this occasion

there was no sign of it : the wood was silent and deserted. And after a time I even began to wonder if the whole thing had not been a trick of the light, and whether we hadn't imagined it all.

Ten minutes passed, quarter of an hour, and then we heard the sound of a car in the distance. Very cautiously we peered out, and Hugh gave a little grunt of satisfaction.

"It is the one I saw," he muttered, and we waited breathlessly to see what would happen. Forty yards away from us it pulled up, and Spragge, who was driving, said something to the passenger hidden behind. And the next moment the ladder maker emerged.

I don't know about the others, but to me he seemed even more repulsive in the daylight than he had the night before. He peered up and down the road ; then, seeing there was no one in sight, he hauled his ladder out of the body of the car. The rope part was wrapped round the central bolster, and its general appearance was that of a gigantic sausage. Then, putting it under his arm, he dived into the undergrowth.

We could hear him crashing about, and then, after a short silence, he emerged, and again went to the back of the car. This time he pulled out a wooden pole about the length of a hay-rake. At one end he had constructed a sort of cradle, and its object was evidently to enable him to hoist the ladder into position on the wall. He went into the wood once more : then, reappearing a second time, he vanished into the back of the car, which drove

rapidly past us towards Rye. His preparations were finished : he was ready for the night's work.

We waited till the car had disappeared, and then stepped out on to the road.

"There would be no harm," remarked Hugh, "in investigating our friend's handiwork. And there is one rather useful point. If he makes as much noise moving about at night as he did then, he won't be hard to follow."

We found the ladder and the wooden cradle without difficulty. They had been roughly pushed under some blackberry-bushes, with but little attempt at concealment. Relying on the fact that there was no one about, all he had done was to put them sufficiently far from the road to escape the eye of a stray passer-by.

"A sailor, I should think," remarked Hugh thoughtfully, as he examined the ladder. "That canvas and tarred twine seem to smack of the sea."

"Do we leave them there?" asked Freckles.

"We do, my lad," laughed Hugh. "Because unless I am very much mistaken to-night's entertainment is going to help us considerably to elucidate things. It is all right, young fellow," he went on reassuringly. "Miss Verney is not going to come to any harm—that I promise you. Let's stroll back and see if John has returned to the fold."

And even as he spoke he swung round with that characteristic movement I knew so well. He was peering into the undergrowth with every muscle

braced, and every nerve alert. But nothing moved : the silence was still absolute. And after a while he relaxed and stepped out of the wood into the road.

"What did you see?" said Freckles eagerly.

"Nothing," he answered curtly. "I thought I did for a moment, but it was my imagination. Come on : let's get back."

He said no more until we were in the house, and then he waited till Freckles had left us alone.

"Peter," he said gravely, "the plot thickens."

"You did see something in the wood, then?" I remarked.

"I saw your mysterious black friend," he answered quietly. "He is very good at concealing himself, but I happen to know a trick or two concerning that game myself. He was about twenty yards away from us."

"But then why didn't we go for him?" I cried bewildered.

"There is one little point that I have learned in the course of my life, Peter," he answered, "that rather influenced the situation. A man without a gun is at a considerable disadvantage when opposed to a man with one. We were in the former category : he was in the latter. Had we moved, we were for it : he'd got us covered."

"But do you really think he would have dared to have shot the three of us close to a main road?" I objected.

"I don't suppose he wished to for a moment," he agreed. "At the same time, had we gone for

him then and there he might have been forced to. And I wasn't for taking the chance. Peter," he went on in a lower voice, "there is a damned sight more in this affair than is at present sticking out on the surface. We are up against something pretty big, and we have got to move warily. But there is one thing I can promise the gentleman in the wood : two people can play at his game. My hand may have lost its cunning to a certain extent, but I think I can still guarantee to stalk the stalker. And next time he will not be the only one with a gun. Don't say anything to the youngster."

I did not, though I couldn't prevent myself from thinking over this new development. That Hugh was perhaps mistaken never entered my head : he simply was one of those men who did not make mistakes on matters of that sort. He had the eyesight of a lynx, and if he had seen an automatic, then there was an automatic. And as he said, it put matters on a different footing. If the owner of the gun was prepared, if forced to it, to kill three men close to a main road, the affair was bigger than we had at first thought. But who was he : what was he : where did he come in ? Was he acting in collusion with the ladder maker Marillard ? Or was he another quite separate cog in the machine ? One thing was certain, whatever he might be : he was a very dangerous addition to the other side. And a further thing, too, was certain. The possibility that it might be Marillard himself who was masquerading in some disguise was disposed of : that at any rate we now knew.

John James had appeared on the scene in time for dinner, eager to hear if any further doings had taken place. And having been posted up to date there was nothing further to do but to wait for darkness before once again treading the familiar road to Temple Tower. Hugh was unusually silent as we sat outside finishing our brandy, and I guessed that he was trying to piece together the jigsaw in his mind. And it came as a feeling of relief when, at a quarter to ten, he got up and said it was time to start.

"Come into my study for a moment, Peter," he said to me. "Look here, old boy," he remarked when he had shut the door, "here is one for you. I daren't trust either of the other two with a gun, but you are used to them."

I slipped a vicious-looking little Colt into my pocket, and I could see the outline of another in his.

"Needless to say, don't use it unless it is absolutely essential," he warned. "But also, needless to say, don't forget that our friend of the wood carries one himself."

We rejoined the others, and Hugh looked at them critically. Freckles was obviously on edge with excitement, and Hugh smote him on the back.

"Easy does it, young fellow," he laughed. "And don't forget—not an unnecessary word, not an unnecessary sound. And if I tell you to do something, jump to it. Now we'll go in two pairs. I'll go first with Scott, and we will go beyond the spot where we know the ladder is hidden. Peter,

you follow with John, and go to ground where we were this afternoon. Give us two or three minutes' start."

It was practically dark when we reached our hiding-place. We had passed no one on the road, nor had we seen any sign of the other two who were some three or four hundred yards ahead of us.

"How long are we likely to have to stop here?" whispered John James to me.

"Ask me another," I answered. "Presumably until our friend from Spragge's Farm considers it safe to start work."

Half an hour passed, an hour, and then quite suddenly from inside the grounds there came the most terrible sound. It rose and fell in a deep-throated snarling roar, savage beyond description. For perhaps a quarter of a minute it continued: then it ceased as abruptly as it had commenced.

"Good God! what was that?" muttered John James in a shaking voice.

"The Pekinese," I answered, none too steadily myself. "I've heard the brute once before."

And at that moment I heard Hugh's voice, low and urgent.

"Peter, where are you?" He loomed out of the darkness. "We have been stung," he said. "The ladder has gone. We have been sitting here all this time like damned fools, and the enemy is inside."

We scrambled to our feet, as Scott joined him.

"When I heard that hound," he went on, "I began to wonder. So I had a look. It is not there.

Our friend is inside the wall. Moreover," he continued grimly, "the dog seems to be aware of the fact."

"What do we do now?" I asked.

"Go round the wall," he answered, "keeping your eyes skinned for the ladder. We ought just to be able to see that bolster thing against the sky. If we can't we are done, because the ladder itself will be inside. I'll lead: Peter, you bring up the rear."

We started off in single file, keeping to the road. As Hugh had said, it was possible to see the top of the wall outlined against the sky, and there had been no sign of the canvas sack when we reached the corner. There we struck away from the road at right angles, still following the wall. And as luck would have it we had come the right way. Not fifty yards from where we had turned we saw it on top of the wall.

"Now," said Hugh, "which of you two is the lightest? Scott, I should think. Up you go, young fellow, on my shoulders: get astride that bolster and pass the ladder over to this side."

It proved easier than one would have thought, and ten seconds later Freckles was sitting astride the wall and Hugh was climbing up the ladder. Then he threw it over to the other side and disappeared down it, leaving Freckles to pass it back for us. John James went next and I followed, and three minutes from the time we had found it we were all inside.

There was plenty of cover to conceal our move-

ments as we crept cautiously forward. The whole place was unkempt and badly looked after. Thick undergrowth grew between the trees, and there was no semblance of even the crudest track or footpath. At last we came to an opening. Ahead of us, some fifty yards away, lay the house, and a light was burning in one of the ground-floor windows. Then suddenly another light went on, this time on the second floor, and outlined against it was the figure of a girl. She was peering out, and Freckles gave a quick exclamation.

"Shut up," growled Hugh. "Not a sound."

It was Miss Verney, and after a time she put out the light again. Once more the house was in darkness save for the ground-floor room.

"I want to see into that room," whispered Hugh. "Skirt round to the left, keeping under cover."

We followed him, dodging from tree to tree, until he halted before another open space. In front of us was what looked like an old ruined wall, as far as one could see in the darkness. It was broken down and crumbling, and in some places was on a level with the ground.

"The old chapel," he muttered, and John James grunted assent.

And we were just on the point of going on when there came the sound of voices from the house. It was too far off to hear what was said, but they were loud and angry. Both were men's, and it was obvious that a quarrel was going on. And then, just for an instant, I saw the two of them

silhouetted against the light, and recognised Granger and the servant Gaspard. Granger was shaking his fists in the air, and Gaspard was standing sullenly with his hands in his pockets. Then they disappeared, and the light went out.

"Damn," muttered Hugh. "However, let's go on and have a look at the chapel. Careful where you put your feet: it is going to be awkward if someone sprains his ankle."

We crept on till we came to the crumbling stonework. It was grass-grown and afforded treacherous walking, rendered all the harder by the darkness. Twice did I dislodge a stone with my foot, and I was just beginning to wonder what good Hugh hoped to do when I heard him give a gasp of surprise. I peered ahead: he was bending over something on the ground.

"Peter," he muttered, "look at this."

"This" was the dog—stone dead. It was an enormous brute, and its body was arched, and its great fangs gleamed white in a last death snarl. And in the air there hung the smell of burnt almonds.

"Prussic acid," he said. "I wondered what had silenced it so suddenly."

And then he straightened up, and his hand went to his revolver pocket.

"The dog is dead," he muttered grimly, "but the man who did it—isn't. Keep your eyes skinned."

Instinctively, we closed up; there was something terrifying about that gloomy, silent house

and the rank undergrowth, even without the additional knowledge that we were not the only watchers. The whole place smelt of decay, and I was on the point of suggesting to Hugh that we should go, when there came from the house the sound of bolts being drawn. Someone was coming out.

The door opened, and in the dim light from the hall we saw for a moment the outlines of Granger and the servant. Then it clanged to again, and we heard the bolt shoot home.

"Nero; where are you, you brute?"

Gaspard's voice came through the darkness: evidently he had been shut out of the house to find out what had happened to the dog. He went plunging into the undergrowth, calling and whistling, whilst we still stood there undecided what to do.

"Nero. Nero."

His voice was coming closer, and Hugh signed to us to move back under cover. And then quite suddenly there came a shrill scream of terror, followed by a horrible choking noise. The calls for Nero ceased abruptly: and after a moment or two the choking noise ceased too. The same thought was in all our minds: what was happening in the darkness close by? What had caused that sudden scream of mortal fear?

Like a shadow Hugh glided away in the direction of the sound, and we followed. Every now and then he paused and peered ahead, but in the gloom of the undergrowth it was impossible to see

anything. And it so happened that it was my lot to make the discovery. I was the last of the four, and quite by chance I was staring at a bush to my left. And it seemed to me that something moved.

I went nearer, and only by the greatest self-control did I check a cry myself. A great black object was lying on the ground, and as I approached it suddenly rose. It seemed to unwrap itself, and I felt instinctively that it was staring at me. Then, with a sort of snarling hiss, it vanished, and I saw what it had left behind.

"Hugh," I said shakily, and in a second he was with me.

"Good God!" he muttered, and pulled out a tiny electric torch. Gaspard was lying there, his face red and swollen, and a glance showed that he was dead. He had been throttled: the marks on his throat were plain to see.

"It was the black figure," I said. "It was lying on top of him, and when it heard me, it got up and vanished."

"It strikes me we are dealing with a homicidal maniac," he remarked, and his voice was hard. "And with that brand one shoots on sight. Let's see if we can't get a sight. Back to the ladder, and move."

He led the way, and we followed as quickly as we could. But to keep up with Hugh in the dark was an impossibility, and he was soon far ahead of us. At last the wall loomed up in front, and it was as we reached it that the sharp crack of a revolver brought us all up standing. It came from

the direction of the road, and a sick feeling of fear got hold of me. Which of them had fired?

"Hugh," I called out, regardless of who might hear. "Where are you?"

"All right, Peter," came his welcome voice, and to my amazement I realised that he was the same side as we were.

"That shot!" I said. "Who fired it?"

"I can't see through a brick wall," he answered, "so I don't know. But with luck we may find out soon. He was over the wall when I got here, and the ladder is the other side. Up you go, Scott, and pass it back."

Once again we repeated the performance of crossing, but this time Hugh was off like a flash the instant he reached the ground. And it was just as we were wondering whether to follow him or not that the final shock of the evening occurred. A voice with a slight American twang came out of the darkness from close by.

"May I ask what you guys think you are doing?" it said. "Or would it be indiscreet?"

"Who are you?" I cried. "And where are you?"

"Who I am doesn't matter at the moment," went on the voice. "Nor where I am. But I have a gun in my hand, which I shall have no hesitation in using, if necessary."

"A game at which two can play."

Hugh's voice, doubly welcome this time, showed that he had returned.

"By the sound you are both new ones to me,"

said the unknown quietly. "I am thinking we'd better have a little light on the scene, or else someone will be making a bloomer."

"Then I will supply it," snapped Hugh.

He switched on his torch, and focussed it on the stranger. He was standing about five yards away, a thin, hatchet-faced man of about fifty. In his hand was a revolver, but it was hanging loosely by his side, and he made no move to raise it. For a while he stood there in silence: then he smiled faintly and spoke.

"I trust the inspection is satisfactory," he remarked. "But in case you want anything more, do you recognise that?"

He opened his coat, displaying the badge of the New York police.

"I do," said Hugh. "Was it you who fired that shot?"

"It was not," answered the other. "And if you will deflect your torch a little lower you will see why, though you will have to come nearer."

He was still holding his coat open, and as we got close to him we could see a bullet hole clean through it on a level with his waist.

"Touch and go, gentlemen," he remarked. "And now, if you have satisfied yourselves that I am not the villain of the piece, I would strongly suggest that you put out that torch. There are people abroad to-night who are attracted to torches, and next time it may not be my coat."

For a moment or two Hugh hesitated, then he switched off the light.

"May I ask what your name is?" he said.

"Certainly, though I fear it will not convey much to you. My name is Matthews—Victor Matthews. Am I right in supposing that you are the gentlemen who were wandering around Spragge's Farm last night?"

"You can suppose any damned thing you please," snapped Hugh. "What I want to know, Mr. Matthews, is what you are doing prowling about here?"

The other laughed.

"I have always heard," he said, "that offence is the best defence. But really, sir, don't you think your remark is a bit cool? You may remember the badge I showed you, which, at any rate, gives me an official standing. But as far as you gentlemen are concerned, I fail to see that you have any—certainly none that permits you to break into the private grounds of a house in the dead of night. However, you need not fear: I shall say nothing about it. In fact, I am profoundly relieved to see you. I have played a lone hand long enough. And if you are prepared to assist me, no one will be more pleased than myself. Did you find anything of interest inside there to-night?"

"We found," said Hugh quietly, "a dead dog and a dead man."

"Dead man!" cried the other sharply. "Who—*le Rossignol?*"

"The how much?" cried Hugh: prizes for French have hitherto eluded him.

"The Nightingale," said Matthews. "The man you saw at Spragge's Farm, making that ladder."

"No: it wasn't him," said Hugh. "It was Gaspard, Granger's servant. And he had been killed by a mysterious being in black."

"Throttled, of course," said the other.

"How do you know that?" asked Hugh suspiciously.

"Because," said Matthews, "the mysterious being in black, as you call him, who very nearly finished me off, is known, amongst other things, as the Silent Strangler. So he has killed the servant, has he?"

"We came on him in the act," said Hugh.

"Then that accounts for his rapid retreat," remarked Matthews thoughtfully. "Well, gentlemen, do we work together, or do we not? I can only assume that you have come into this show out of idle curiosity, or for sport. Am I right?"

And now it was Hugh's turn to laugh.

"I have heard worse guesses," he said. "What do you think, Peter?"

"I certainly think that if Mr. Matthews can explain some of these mysterious happenings we should join forces," I said.

"I can explain almost everything," he answered quietly. "But I do not think this is either the time or the place. So let us put things in order here, and go. It will be dawn soon."

"But look here, chaps," objected Freckles,

"what about the bloke from Spragge's Farm—the Sparrow or whatever he is called? He must still be lying about all over the place."

It was perfectly true: in the general excitement the ladder maker had been forgotten.

"You saw no signs of him inside?" asked Matthews.

"Not a trace," said Hugh. "And even if we didn't see him, I should have expected to hear him. He is not a silent mover. Incidentally, I wonder if he came at all to-night."

"He must have, to put the ladder there," said John.

"Not of necessity," answered Hugh. "Don't forget that this man in black saw him hide it and knew where it was."

"How do you know that?" cried Matthews.

"Because we encountered the gentleman in the wood this afternoon. Only, as he was armed and we weren't, we left him alone."

Matthews whistled softly.

"You can thank your stars that you did," he remarked. "Or we should not be having this conversation now. Anyway, gentlemen, I look at it this way: If *le Rossignol* is inside there, let him remain: he will do no harm. He will kill Granger if he gets a chance, but, believe me, that doesn't matter. And if he is outside, again, let him remain there."

"That is all jolly fine and large," cried Freckles, "but a great friend of mine—a lady—is inside there, too."

"What's that?" said Matthews. "A lady? How is that?"

"My fiancée is doing secretarial work for Granger," explained Freckles.

And once again Matthews whistled softly.

"Splendid," was his somewhat unexpected remark. "Perfectly splendid."

"I am damned if I see anything splendid about it," grunted Freckles.

"But I venture to think that you will," answered the other. And then his tone changed. "Gentlemen," he said briskly, "we cannot stand here all night. You, of course, must do exactly as you like. But may I ask what you were proposing to do if you had not run into me?"

And for a while no one answered. It was a bit of a poser: what was there to be done?

"As I thought," continued Matthews, "you don't know. And I don't blame you. To be quite frank, gentlemen, you have put yourselves in a position that is a little difficult to explain. If you go to the police you have to admit that you have broken the law yourselves, and you have to tell them a story which will take a bit of swallowing. I know it is true: you know it is true, but—well, I won't labour the point. I think you would find the atmosphere a little incredulous, to put it mildly. So I have a definite proposition to make to you. Do nothing at all until you have heard my story. As I told you, I can explain everything—or almost everything. Then you must do as you see fit—go to the police or not, as you like. In

return, you shall tell me all you know, and between us, gentlemen''—his voice rose in his excitement—''we will beat the most dangerous criminal that lives in the world to-day.''

''Yes, but what about my fiancée?'' cried Freckles.

''I give you my solemn word that she is in no danger,'' said Matthews quietly. ''But if you are under any apprehensions, get her out of the house to-morrow. Anyway, you can't now. And, as I said before, I think you will understand, when you have heard my story, why I was pleased when I heard that one of our side was in the house. Well, gentlemen, what do you say?''

And at last Hugh spoke.

''Agreed,'' he said laconically. ''You had better come to my shanty.''

''Good!'' cried Matthews. ''Then the first thing to do is to remove that ladder and hide it in a different place. And after that we will go to your house, and I will tell you a story which, though long, I think you will find not uninteresting.''

CHAPTER VII

IN WHICH VICTOR MATTHEWS BEGINS HIS STORY

"FOR the purposes of this argument, Mr. Matthews," remarked Hugh, "you had better assume that we know nothing."

We had all returned to his house, and having hunted round for bacon and eggs, had first of all had some breakfast. The ladder had been carefully hidden in the undergrowth, and we had seen no further trace of the man in black. And now, seated on the terrace, with the mist stretching like a white sea below us, we waited eagerly for him to begin.

"All right," he answered, "I will assume that you know nothing. And, as a matter of fact, gentlemen, I am very certain that you do know nothing of what I am going to tell you. Because I am going back to the year of grace 1881. It was in that year that the inhabitants of Bordeaux had an unsuspected honour accorded them—so unsuspected, in fact, that most of them are still probably unaware of it. Under the very shadow of the Cathedral of St. André a male child was born into the world. The question of nomenclature was a little difficult, since the mother had no idea who was the proud father, but she compromised by calling the child Jean and giving it her own surname of Marillard.

"From the very first, I should imagine, the

child was a most unprepossessing specimen. It was abnormally ugly, and that fact, coupled with the sneers of its companions over the question of its birth, combined to make its life intolerable. Anyway, it never had a fair chance, and as a result, the boy's character grew from bad to worse. He was an incipient criminal from the start, and his surroundings nurtured the growth, until, at the age of sixteen, he was nothing more nor less than a savage young animal. And if you chose to turn up the archives of the Bordeaux police you would there find records of positively murderous assaults perpetrated by this youth, in many cases on men years older than himself. He was possessed of incredible strength, and at times he was perfectly uncontrollable. He also possessed another strange characteristic—a very soft and melodious voice."

The speaker smiled slightly and waved his hand in the direction of Spragge's Farm.

"Thus the propitious beginning of Jean Marillard, now, as you will see, in his forty-seventh year. However, to return to his earlier days. He was eighteen years old, as far as I remember, when he decided that he had had enough of Bordeaux and drifted to Paris, where he naturally became associated with the lowest type of Apache. And you must remember, gentlemen, that in those days the Apaches were Apaches—not harmless citizens earning an honest penny by dressing themselves up for the part for the benefit of credulous tourists, as is the case

to-day. Like to like: it was but in the nature of things that young Marillard should consort with the most vicious of the whole tribe. And it was then that he received his nick-name of 'the Nightingale.'

"For the next year or so his history is unimportant. He remained submerged in the underworld of Paris, a skulker in dark corners. And then, with the invention of motor-cars, came the great opportunity. The thing has been done, of course, *ad nauseam* since, but the first motor bandit gang was the one of which the Nightingale was a prominent member. It is all a question of proportion, and just as in these days a racing car, with its eighty miles an hour, has the advantage over other users of the road, so, then, did some ancient Peugeot capable of only twenty.

"And now I must leave him for a moment and introduce you to some other characters in the story. Only two are of any importance, and one of those two . . ."

He paused, and a strange, almost dreamy, look came into his eyes.

"One of those two is the most powerful and dangerous man in the world to-day. I will take the other first. His origin is completely obscure. Half an Englishman, half Heaven knows what, he was in his way as dangerous a man as the Nightingale. But it was a very different way. The Nightingale, to do him credit, feared no man. He fought in the open—fought like a beast perhaps—but face to face. Also he was loyal to his pals, which was just

what the other was not. A slimy, mean, creeping little beast, who conformed to no standard at all save what suited himself best. They called him *le Crapeau,* which I always thought was an insult to such an intelligent beast as the toad. And unless I am very much mistaken—in fact, I know I am not mistaken—the Toad is your next-door neighbour, who now passes under the name of Granger. When I say 'passes under,' for all I know Granger may really be his name."

"Do you mean to say," shouted Freckles, "that that is the man who Pat—who Miss Verney is working for?"

"Don't alarm yourself, Mr. Scott," said Matthews quietly. "You already have my word for it that your fiancée is perfectly safe. Moreover, I think it is more than likely that you will finally come to the conclusion that the luckiest thing she ever did in her life was to go there."

"What on earth do you mean?" said Freckles, staring at him blankly.

"May I finish my story, and I think you will see what I mean?" said Matthews. "Where was I? Ah! yes—the Toad. There were three other members of the gang, who do not concern us at all now, since they are all dead. For the sake of clearness, however, I will give you their nicknames. One—a great hulking brute of a man—was called the Butcher. He was a slaughterer pure and simple: a man with no brain, but of great strength. The second was a deadly shot with a revolver, who was known—why I can't tell

you—as the Snipe. And the last member calls for no particular description. He had no nickname, and was called Robert.

"Now, I do not propose to weary you with a full account of their activities. Many of them were quite insignificant: many were even stupid. Remember that motor-cars were a new toy then for everyone, and our friends were no exception to the rule. They behaved, in short, on frequent occasions like children who are showing off, and they were treated accordingly by the authorities. Until the day came . . ."

Once again he paused, that same dreamy look in his eyes.

"Gentlemen," he went on quietly, "you may think that what I am about to tell you is an exaggeration: that I have a bee in my bonnet on this particular subject. You may think that such a being as a master criminal is merely part of the stock in trade of the sensational novelist—a fiction of the films. You are wrong. It was in 1898 that a strange sinister influence began to make itself felt throughout the underworld at Paris, and not only through the underworld, but through that section of society that reacts instantly to it—the police. At first the influence was vague—more a suggestion than a definite force. Incredible rumours flew round, and no one knew what to believe. The police, as a body, scoffed openly at the whole thing: so did some of the Apaches. For gradually these rumours crystallised into one central idea: that a power had arisen which was

definitely controlling the criminal activities of Paris, and controlling them for its own ends.

"What the power consisted of no one knew: who wielded it, no one knew. But after a year had passed the scoffing ceased: the thing was a proven fact. An intelligence was at work more powerful than the police, more cunning than the Apaches.

"How came the proof, you ask? I will tell you. Not by any single dramatic stroke, but by a series of incidents, which, though small in themselves, when taken cumulatively, afforded irrefutable evidence. Men who had received orders from an unknown source, and had disregarded them, were found dead: and no one knew the hand that had struck them down. The police, too, did not escape: gendarmes who had interfered with the unknown's plan were killed. Some were shot: a few were knifed, but his favourite method was to strangle his victims. In fact, a reign of terror started, the more terrifying because of the air of mystery that surrounded it. Men spoke together in bated whispers, glancing fearfully over their shoulders, for no one knew who was a spy or who was not. The King of the Underworld had arrived."

Victor Matthews paused to light a cigarette, whilst we waited eagerly for him to continue. Amazing though the story was, it was his quiet way of telling it that made it so impressive.

"It was in 1900," he continued, "that a further development took place. He was cunning, this man—and clever. He knew to a nicety the

French nationality: his psychology was perfect. Up to date, he had maintained his air of mystery: from now on he would give them something concrete to catch hold of. And so it was that there gradually came into circulation a series of exquisitely drawn little pictures. A man would find one in his pocket when he came to undress, with no idea as to how it had come there. And with each of them would be some definite order, written in block capitals. And if those orders were disobeyed, the recipient would later be found dead, with the same device pinned to his coat. Here is one that I kept for many years."

He pulled out his pocket-book, and even as he had it in his hands, his eyes dilated and he sat motionless, staring at a tree just behind my seat.

"My God!" he muttered. "Look at that."

"What the devil," began Hugh, and then he came over to where I was sitting. And in silence we all stared at a small piece of paper which we had failed to notice in our absorption up till then. It was about two inches square, and was fastened to the tree by a drawing-pin. And in the centre of it, drawn in ink, was a perfect representation of a hunchback.

"Is that the device you mean?" said Hugh quietly.

For answer Matthews unfastened his pocket-book, and from it he took the exact replica of the paper pinned to the tree, save that it was yellow with age. But the drawing was the same—a hunchback.

"I took this one," he said gravely, "from the body of a man who was found strangled one morning behind a lot of crates in the Gare de Lyons. He had in his pocket a third-class ticket for Marseilles, but he had not caught his train."

For a while we were all silent, each busy with our own thoughts. This sudden verification of Matthews' story, coming, as it were, out of the blue into a sunny English garden, seemed wellnigh uncanny. Almost mechanically Hugh went to the telescope and stared through it. And after a while he swung round and faced us.

"How the devil did that get there?" he said.

Matthews gave a short laugh.

"Your activities are evidently known, Captain Drummond, and are not approved of. *Le Bossu Masqué* must have put it there himself."

"*Masqué?*" I cried, and Matthews nodded.

"Yes: I was coming to that, when this somewhat dramatic interruption occurred."

"Damn the fellow," spluttered Hugh. "Having the gall to come into my garden and stick his cursed bits of paper all over the view. If I catch the blighter I'll turn his hump into a goitre in his neck. However, Mr. Matthews, please pardon the natural annoyance of a respectable English householder. Let's hear some more."

"Well, as I was saying," continued the other, "it was in 1900 that that design began to become familiar with the population of Paris. That it was a further development of the same man, we knew; his methods remained exactly similar to those he employed when he was unknown. Only now he

began to grow more daring. Up till then, his orders had always been transmitted in writing: now he commenced to issue them verbally. And this, of course, was seized on as a golden opportunity by the police. In every community there are men who can be bought, and the underworld of Paris is certainly no exception to the rule. And so as soon as this new development became known plans were very carefully laid to catch him. With great secrecy, and through the most trustworthy channels possible, it was communicated to certain likely quarters that in the event of anyone receiving a message from *le Bossu,* with instructions to meet him personally, the police were to be at once communicated with. And a very big reward was promised if the information led to his capture.

"Sure enough, one day we got a ring on the telephone. And a guarded voice informed us that *le Bossu* had summoned the speaker—a particularly unpleasant form of brute known as the Rat—to go to a small hotel not far from the Gare de l'Est at ten that night. The police surrounded the place: every entrance to the hotel was picketed when the Rat arrived. He was presumably to receive more detailed instructions in the hall as to which room he was to go to, and we gave him orders to communicate the number to the man at the door. It had been decided to allow him a little time with *le Bossu* so that we could find out what scheme that gentleman had in view, and it was ten minutes after the Rat had disappeared upstairs that we rushed the room.

"Now, gentlemen, I was in the passage out-

side the room from the time the Rat went in. And I will swear that no one came out. Yet, when we went in, he was lying stone dead in the middle of the carpet, with a knife driven up to the hilt in his back."

"Good Lord!" said Freckles, a cigarette he had forgotten to light between his lips. "But how did the fellow get away?"

Matthews shrugged his shoulders.

"The window was open, and so that was where he escaped, presumably. But that was only one case out of a dozen."

"Hold hard a minute," said Hugh. "Had no one in the hotel seen the man who took the room?"

"The room had been booked by telephone," said Matthews. "And the hotel, though small, is a busy one. Numbers of men had been in there that evening, and it was quite impossible to say which of them it was."

"But a hunchback is a pretty conspicuous figure," I objected.

"Ah! but was he a hunchback? True, he had adopted this device, but that was no proof that he was one himself. Or possibly the hump was detachable—a specially assumed disguise."

"Yes—that's true," agreed Hugh.

"You may take it from me, gentlemen," went on Matthews, "that we took every possible, and impossible, theory into account. But the plain, bald fact remained that under the very noses of the police the Rat had been murdered, and the

murderer had vanished into thin air. However, I must get on: that is all ancient history and is nothing whatever to do with our little affair to-day, save that it gives you a good idea of the type of man we are dealing with."

"Awfully jolly," murmured Freckles. "He sounds an absolute topper."

"I'm coming now to the part that really concerns us," continued Matthews. "And to make it clear to you, I will take it as it actually happened, not as we found it out at the trial of the Nightingale. He was our informant when, unfortunately, it was too late. As you will understand, after the episode of the Rat, and several others of a similar type, it had become impossible to carry on with the method we had originally hoped so much from. No one dared run the risk, though we doubled and trebled the money offered. But certain facts leaked out from the men who had seen him, and two of these were early established. First—he had a hump, though, as I said before, whether it was genuine or not we didn't know. Second—he was always masked. There was not a soul in the whole underworld of Paris who could claim to have seen his face.

"It was in September, 1902, that the Nightingale received a message which caused him to turn pale with fear—a summons from *le Bossu Masqué*. The Nightingale and his gang had, as I have already told you, been playing about with their motor-car, and enjoying themselves in their own mild way. If the truth be known, I think they

were rather frightened of the machine : certain it is, they had no notion of its possibilities as an instrument of crime. And to them, pottering along with their little footpad tricks, came this sudden summons. The car, driven by the Nightingale alone, was to be taken to the small town of Magny, halfway between Paris and Rouen, and there further instructions would be given him."

Matthews smiled slightly.

"I can imagine the feelings of *le Rossignol,*" he went on, "as he drove out through the Porte Maillot on that fine September morning. The ever-present fear of the driver of those days that the car would break down was for once forgotten : he probably prayed devoutly that it would. But his prayer was unanswered, and at eleven o'clock he drew up outside the Hotel du Grand-Cerf, in Magny, and proceeded to fortify himself with some alcohol.

"Lunch time came, and with it a wild hope that there was some mistake, and that he was to be allowed to continue his normal life undisturbed by *le Bossu Masqué*. Vain thought : the summons came as he finished his meal. A letter was handed to him by the garçon, which he opened with trembling hands. It ran as follows :

"'At eight to-night you will take the road to Gisors on foot. Four kilometres out of the town, on the left of the road, is a small copse. In the centre of the copse is a wood-cutter's shed. Go there.'

"He told us at the trial, that three times that afternoon did he get as far as the local gendarmerie, only on each occasion to have his courage fail him at the last moment. Poor devil! one can hardly blame him. No one knew better than he what had been the penalty for treachery in Paris. And if it occurred in Paris with the whole force of police available, what chance had a couple of stout local gendarmes at night in the middle of a wood? And so eight o'clock found him taking the road for Gisors. He trudged along whistling, probably to try and keep his spirits up, until at length the copse on the left of the road loomed up out of the darkness. Like all town-dwellers the country at night was full of nameless terrors for him, even on normal occasions. The sudden scream of a night-bird could make him sweat with fear far more easily than any report of a revolver. So it isn't difficult to imagine his feelings on this far from normal occasion, when he struck into the trees and began to search for the wood-cutter's shed.

"At last he found it. It was in pitch darkness, and when he tried the door it was locked. (Interrupting myself for a moment, I think at the trial, when all this came out, that our friend made as good a story as he could out of it, to try and enlist sympathy. But even granted that, I'll bet he had a pretty grim half-hour.) After a while he sat down, and took out a packet of Caporals. A cigarette, he reflected, might help to quieten his nerves. And even as he felt in his pocket for a

match a hand came out of the darkness and took the cigarette out of his mouth.

"Frozen with horror he sat there, leaning against the wall of the shed. Speech he could understand: the roar of Paris he was at home in, but that silent action in the middle of a deserted wood, where he had believe himself to be alone, literally petrified him with terror. His tongue was cleaving to his dry mouth: he couldn't even scream. Somewhere close to him was that most dreaded being in Paris—the masked hunchback.

"The sweat ran in streams from his forehead: his teeth chattered. If only this other one would speak: if only something would happen to break this ghastly silence! But there was nothing—nothing save the faint creaking of the trees in the night breeze. At last he forced himself to look round: there, standing just behind him, was the figure of a man. He could make out no details: only the outline could be seen against the blackness of the wood. And after a while he scrambled to his feet.

"'I have come,' he said in a shaking voice.

"'Why do you suppose, *Rossignol,* that I chose a spot like this for our rendezvous?'

"According to Marillard at his trial the voice of *le Bossu* was the most terrible thing he had ever heard. It was never raised, and his own description of it was that it sounded like drops of iced water boring into his brain.

"'That we should be secret, M'sieur,' he stammered.

"'And that is why you propose to light a cigarette in the middle of a dark wood,' went on the voice. 'That you were a fool I have long known: I perceive that you are an even more incredible imbecile than I suspected.'

"'Pardon, M'sieur,' muttered *le Rossignol.* 'I am not used to the country: I did not think.'

"'Precisely: you did not think. In future, you will think. Now pay very close attention. To-night you will sleep at the Hotel du Grand-Cerf. To-morrow you will return to Paris. The day after you and the Snipe will take the car and go to Chateaudun. You know the road?'

"'No, M'sieur. But I will find out.'

"'Yes: you will find out. You leave Paris through the Porte d'Orleans. The distance is one hundred and twenty-five kilometres. Arrived there you will put up at the Hotel de la Place, and see that your car is refilled with petrol and oil. Place also in your car two bottles of wine and food sufficient for two of you for a day. The rest of your gang will go there by train. They will put up at the Hôtel St. Louis. Repeat what I have said.'

"In a trembling voice *le Rossignol* repeated his instructions.

"'Good. You will then await further instructions. And be careful, *Rossignol,* to put a guard on your tongue. Too much wine may be dangerous. If you serve me well, it will be to your advantage. If you fail—you will not do so twice. It is my pleasure to employ your car for

other purposes than frightening old women in the street.'

"'*Oui, M'sieur:* I will not fail. The Porte d'Orleans, you said?'

"But there was no answer: *le Rossignol* was alone. As he had come so did *le Bossu Masqué* go—in utter silence. And an hour later a badly shaken Apache entered the Hotel du Grand-Cerf and called for wine. Whatever the future might hold, this nerve-wracking first fence was safely over. That eerie wood was a thing of the past: in the inn was warmth and comfort and, most important of all, light.

"Now there were many people who, when they heard the story I have just told you at the trial, laughed it to scorn. Why, they demanded, these elaborate and theatrical details? Why this meeting in a deserted wood at what must have been great inconvenience to *le Bossu* himself, if all that transpired could as easily have been done in Paris itself? But they didn't see what I and one or two others saw. They didn't understand that *le Bossu* was a master of criminal psychology. He realised the immensely more powerful effect that he would produce on the mentality of a man like Marillard, if he met him as he had done, rather than in Paris, which was *le Rossignol's* own atmosphere. It was the terror of the unknown that he was exploiting—the most potent terror of all, especially to a man of low mental calibre. He was proposing to use this gang for his own ends, and none knew better than he that fear was the

safest way of keeping their mouths shut. However, that is all in parenthesis. Subsequent events prove only too clearly that I and the others who thought as I did were right. So we will pass on to the day but one after, which found *Rossignol* and the Snipe installed in the Hôtel de la Place at Chateadun, while the Toad and the other two were in the Hôtel St. Louis. The car had been filled up with petrol and oil: all instructions had been carried out, and there was nothing to do but to wait.

"And now we come to one of the most amazing crimes that has ever been perpetrated in France: the crime, moreover, that is the direct cause of this present state of affairs here. Strange, you will think, that such a long time has elapsed, but the reason for that you will understand when I have finished. Many of the actual details of the crime, I can, of course, only fill in by guess-work: for many we have to take Marillard's unsupported word, on an occasion, too, when admittedly he was trying to make out the best case he could for himself. Still, the story hangs together, and I can vouch for its main essentials.

"About three miles out from Chateaudun, on the road to Vendôme, there stands the Chateau du Lac Noir. It is a magnificent old building standing in enormous grounds. It dates, I think, from the thirteenth century, and until quite recent years was the property of the Duc de St. Euogat. However, he had found keeping up the place beyond his means, and he had sold it about ten

years previously to a Russian—Prince Boris Marcovitch. He was a man of fabulous wealth, whose only hobby in life was collecting. He didn't confine himself to one particular line : anything that attracted his attention and that he liked, he bought. But if there was one thing that he did have a predilection for, it was precious stones—particularly emeralds. I have talked to men who had seen his collection, and they have, one and all, assured me that it was unique in the world.

"He was a man of peculiar tastes—this Russian Prince. He rarely, if ever, left the chateau grounds, and when he wanted company he imported it wholesale from Paris. It didn't seem to matter very much to him whether he knew the people or whether he didn't. He would write to a cousin of his who lived in the capital, requesting him to bring down a party. Perhaps a dozen girls and some men would arrive, and then for twenty-four hours there would take place what can only be described as an orgy. Drink flowed like water, and the only person on whom it had no effect was the Prince himself.

"I remember a man who had attended one of them describing the end of the performance to me.

"'I was pretty well tight myself,' he said, 'but not as bad as the rest. The whole lot of them, men and women alike, were sprawling round the table dead drunk. In the earlier part of the debauch the Prince had been the leader of the revels : now he sat at the end of the table,

twirling a wine-glass between his fingers and with a look of ineffable contempt on his face. His thoughts were so obvious that he might have spoken them aloud.'

"'"'You boors: you loutish swine—why in heaven's name did I ever have anything to do with you?"'"

"So my informant told me, and I had confirmation from other sources. He seemed to be a man who from time to time had to break out, and then was sickened by the reaction when he had done so. But his disgust would only last a couple of months at the most. Then another of the same sort of parties would be given, to be attended with the same result.

"It is perhaps unnecessary to say that, whatever was the effect on the host, his guests thoroughly enjoyed the entertainment—particularly the ladies of the party. The Prince would think nothing of giving each girl a present worth a hundred pounds when they left, and since most of them came from the ranks of the Casino de Paris or the Folies Bergères, you can imagine their feelings on the matter. And so when it was noised abroad in the theatrical set in Paris that a supreme debauch of all was planned, the Prince's cousin became amazingly popular. It was to be a fancy-dress affair, and everyone was to come as an Apache. It got round of course to Police Headquarters, but it was none of our business what the Prince chose to do in his chateau. Our only concern was the prevention of crime, and it was on that

account that a week before this historic party I found myself getting out of the train at Chateaudun. You will understand that I was unofficially attached, and Grodin, my immediate superior, thought that I could give the Prince a friendly warning better than one of the regular men.

"He saw me at once when I arrived, and as I looked at that refined aristocrat I marvelled that he could ever give way to these appalling excesses.

"'Monsieur le Prince,' I said, when he had glanced at my card, 'I wish to assure you that my visit is entirely unofficial. But we understand that you are giving a party here shortly, and that your guests are coming as Apaches.'

"'Correct, Mr. Matthews,' he remarked. 'Is there any objection?'

"'None, sir,' I said. 'But in view of your magnificent collection we wondered at Headquarters if you would like any police protection for the night in question?'

"He drew himself up and stared at me coldly.

"'May I ask why I should require protection against my own guests?'

"'You will pardon me, sir,' I said doggedly, 'but I intend no reflection on those of your guests whom you know personally. It is, however, a well-known fact that many of the people who accept your hospitality are quite unknown to you.'

"'Proceed, sir,' he said quietly.

"'And such an opportunity as this is the very one to attract the attention of *le Bossu Masqué*.'

"He began to laugh silently: then he rose and pressed a bell.

"'Come with me, Mr. Matthews.' He gave an order in Russian to a servant who entered. 'I have heard rumours of this mysterious *Bossu Masqué,* and I can assure you that nothing would please me more than if he should honour my party with his presence.'

"He was leading the way into the garden as he spoke.

"'He might succeed in giving me what I find so difficult to experience to-day—a genuine thrill. On the other hand—he might not. In my spare time, Mr. Matthews, I have sought to improve a natural aptitude in the use of firearms, and you shall judge for yourself whether my efforts have proved successful.'

"He had halted by a small garden table on which a waiting servant had already placed a case containing two revolvers. Once again he gave an order in Russian, and the man took up a position twenty yards away, holding my visiting-card in his outstretched hand. There came a crack, and the visiting-card was no more. Then the man threw an apple in the air. The Prince shot twice. He got the apple with the first, and the largest bit of it with the second."

"Good shooting," said Hugh. "I used to be able to do that myself, but I have my doubts if I could do it now. Sorry to interrupt. Go on, Mr. Matthews."

"As you say, Captain Drummond—good

shooting, marvellous shooting. He laid down his revolver, and turned to me with a smile.

"'That, sir,' he said, 'is why I say that on the other hand—he might not. For I should have not the smallest hesitation in killing him on the spot.'

"I bowed: there seemed nothing more to say.

"'I understand perfectly,' he continued, 'the object of your visit. And I am greatly obliged to your Headquarters for their courtesy. But I can assure you that I am quite capable of dealing with any uninvited guest myself; and, as for the others, I have implicit confidence in my cousin.'

"So I returned to the station and to Paris. I reported the result of my visit to Grodin, who shrugged his shoulders.

"'Well, anyway, he can't blame us if anything does happen,' he remarked, and at that we left it. We had done all we could: we had warned him. And, as Grodin pointed out, *le Bossu Masqué,* up to date, had confined his activities to Paris and its suburbs."

Victor Matthews paused and lit a cigarette.

"Eight days later," he said quietly, "we received a frenzied call on the telephone from the Chateaudun police. In the early hours of the morning Prince Boris Marcovitch, while at supper with his friends, had been shot dead through the heart, by *le Bossu Masqué,* and practically the whole collection had been stolen."

"Good Lord!" cried Hugh, "this beats the band. Take a breather, my dear fellow, and have a drink."

CHAPTER VIII

IN WHICH VICTOR MATTHEWS ENDS HIS STORY

"I WAS afraid you might find the story a little long," said Matthews, as the butler brought out the tray.

"Long be blowed," cried Hugh. "It is the most extraordinary yarn I ever listened to. Sounds like a book."

"Truth is stranger, Captain Drummond. The old tag. I think that beer looks very promising."

He took the glass, and raised his hand in a toast.

"I'm just trying to think," he went on after a while, "of the best way of telling you the remainder. I think perhaps I shall make it most interesting if I first of all give you the story as it was told us on our arrival at the Chateau du Lac Noir by the guests who had been detained there by the local police pending our coming.

"There were fourteen of them in all—eight women, and six men. And their condition, as you can imagine, was pretty bad. In addition to this appalling affair, which in itself was sufficient to upset anyone, the whole lot of them had been extremely drunk the night before. And they looked like it.

"However, by dint of questioning and piecing together their various stories, we managed to arrive at a fairly accurate account of what had

happened. They had arrived by the train which reached Chateaudun at four o'clock the previous day. As usual they had been met at the station by the Prince's private carriages, and taken straight to the chateau, where the Prince received them. Champagne and caviare had at once been served, which sent them all upstairs to change for dinner in an expansive mood.

"Dinner itself started at eight-thirty and was preceded by more rounds of a special *apéritif* known only to the Prince, so that even at the beginning of the meal several of them were talking out of their turn. And by eleven o'clock most of them were riotously tight. Two girls from the Folies Bergères were dancing on the table: in fact, an extra special debauch was in full swing. The hours went on: more drink arrived, and yet more drink, until many of the guests were frankly and unashamedly asleep. Only the Prince remained his normal self, though he was drinking level with them all.

"Now it was his custom to hold these carousals in the huge old banqueting-hall. It was a lofty room with a broad staircase at one end leading up to the musicians' gallery. They had long since faded away, completely worn out, and in the general din probably no one even noticed that they had ceased playing. And so you can visualise the scene. The candles guttering on the table around which sprawled the drunken guests; and sitting at one end, with a look of scornful weariness already beginning to show on his face, their

host. The staircase was behind his left shoulder, the top half of it in semi-darkness, as were the portraits of the Prince's ancestors which stared down on the revellers from the walls.

"Suddenly one of the men who was singing some maudlin song broke off abruptly and leaned forward rubbing his eyes. What on earth was that strange object on the staircase? Was it really there—or was the great black shadow his imagination? Then it moved and he lurched to his feet. Grim reality struggled through the fumes of alcohol, and he hiccoughed out a warning.

"The others looked up: a woman screamed. And cold as ice the Prince turned round to find himself facing a masked hunchback. There was a moment of dead silence—then he rose to his feet. And even as he did so a solitary shot rang out from the stairs, and the Prince pitched forward on his face—stone dead.

"The guests, sobered by this utterly unexpected tragedy, huddled together like sheep. '*Le Bossu Masqué*' passed from lip to lip in fearful whispers. And still this monstrous figure stood there motionless, his revolver still in his hand. Suddenly the door from the servants' quarters opened and five men came in. Save for the fact that they were masked they might have been five of the guests, because they too were dressed as Apaches. Two of them advanced to the terrified guests, and each of them carried a revolver. No word was spoken; evidently the whole thing had been planned beforehand. While the two of them

guarded the guests, and the sinister masked hunchback stood in silence on the stairs the other three systematically looted the place. They smashed in cabinets and wrenched open drawers, while the man whose collection they were taking lay dead by his own table.

"It lasted nearly an hour so we are told. The stuff was carried out through the front door, the looters returning each time for more. And then at length they finished, and the three men who had been removing the stuff disappeared. There was the sound, and of this they were one and all quite positive, of a motor-car driving away—then silence. Slowly the two men who had been covering them the whole time backed to the door and disappeared also. And with that pandemonium broke loose.

"As mysteriously as he had come *le Bossu Masqué* had vanished. The thing was over and finished; only broken cabinets and a dead man, who stared at the ceiling, remained to prove that it was ghastly reality and not a drunken dream. Completely sobered by now the men of the party dashed round the house, only to find that every servant had been bound and gagged. So they did the only thing there was to be done and sent for the local police.

"Well, that was the situation that confronted us on our arrival. Two things were established at once. *Le Bossu Masqué* had added yet another murder to the long list already to his credit; and the fact that a motor-car had been used, and that

there were five Apaches in the raid, made it practically certain that the gang involved was *le Rossignol's*. So the first thing obviously to do was to try and lay that gang by the heels, which should have proved an easy matter. They have their invariable haunts to which they always return sooner or later, and we anticipated no difficulty whatever in catching them. But two days went past ; three ; a week ; and still there was no sign of them. And it became increasingly obvious to me that the reason was simply and solely that they were acting under orders from *le Bossu Masqué* himself : it was his brain we were contending against—not theirs.

"Then came a new development. In a wood not far from Châtres a shepherd found a deserted motor-car. It had been forced in through some undergrowth, and was completely hidden from the road. Indeed, but for the fact that he thought he had seen a snake, and had gone into the bushes after it, the car might have remained there for months without being discovered. Of the gang, however, there was still no trace, nor of the loot they had taken—loot which, on the Prince's cousin's valuation, was worth, at a conservative estimate, half a million pounds.

"And then at last came the final development of all. The telephone bell rang in our office, and a voice came over the wire. It was disguised, but not quite sufficiently. Before he had said a sentence I knew it was the Toad speaking, though I didn't let on that I knew. And his information

was to the effect that *le Rossignol's* gang were lying up in a wood halfway between Mamers and Alençon. He was speaking from a public telephone call office so it was hopeless to try and track him through that. But I passed on the word that the Toad was back in Paris, and sat down to think it out.

"If you look at the map you will see that the wood mentioned by the Toad is some sixty miles west of Chateaudun, while the wood where the car was found is about twenty miles due north. That seemed peculiar in the first place. In the second, what had caused the Toad to split? That it was quite in keeping with his nature I knew, but the Toad never did anything without a reason. And what was the reason in this case? Why had he turned traitor? Was he doing it on his own account, or was he doing it under orders from *le Bossu Masqué?* Had that gentleman decided that now the cat had pulled the chestnut out of the fire for him, its services could very well be dispensed with?

"However, the first thing to be done was to verify the Toad's information. The wood he mentioned was surrounded by a cordon of armed police, who gradually closed in on the centre. And what he had told us proved correct. The gang was there; at least, three of them were. Who fired the first shot I don't know, but men's fingers are quick on the trigger in cases like that. Sufficient to say that two of the police were killed, and two were wounded, before the three bandits

fell riddled with bullets. Finding themselves cornered, half starving, dirty, and unkempt, the Snipe, the Butcher, and the man called Robert fought like rats in a trap and died. But of the Nightingale there was no trace. Nor, again, was there any sign of the stolen property, though we searched the wood with a fine-tooth comb. And so there we were up against a brick wall once again. It was true that three of the gang were dead, but they were the three least important ones. *Le Bossu Masqué* had completely vanished: so had both the Nightingale and the Toad. Had they split up the loot between them, or what had they done with it? Were they hanging together or had they fallen out? Those were the questions we constantly asked one another, and as constantly failed to answer.

"And then, one day about a fortnight after the fight in the wood, we caught the Nightingale. With his voice and terrible apearance he was altogether too conspicuous a character to escape notice. And the police found him hiding in a back slum in Rouen, and promptly despatched him to us in Paris, where he first of all told us that part of his story that I have already told you.

"If you remember, we left him and his gang at Chateaudun putting up in the two hotels of the town, and having arrived there on the day of the Prince's party. They were completely in the dark as to what their further orders were to be: all they had to do was to sit and wait. Their instructions came to them at eight o'clock that night, and

were simple in the extreme. They were to wait until eleven, and were then to proceed by car to the Chateau du Lac Noir. The motor was to be left in the shadow of some trees a hundred metres from the front door, and they were to remain hidden in the trees, also, until they saw a light flash twice from the bedroom window over the front door. They were then to proceed to the back door, where they would again receive instructions.

"They waited until, at two-thirty, they saw the light. When they got to the back door they found it open, and confronting them in the darkness of the passage the dim black figure of the *Bossu Masqué,* who ordered them to pick up some coils of rope and follow him.

"They obeyed: as *le Rossignol* said—'Messieurs, we dared not do otherwise. We were more frightened of *le Bossu Masqué* than of all the fiends in hell.'

"Suddenly he flung open the door into a lighted room, and there confronting them they saw the four men-servants, who, following the example of those upstairs, were a bit fuddled themselves. Incidentally, of course, we knew all this part of the story already. But confirmation is always valuable, and we thought it a good thing to let him tell the yarn in his own way. They trussed the servants up, and then they received their final instructions. When they heard a shot they were to go straight into the banqueting-hall: the Snipe and he were to cover the guests, the other three were to loot the place. And he told us then

exactly the same story as we had already heard from the guests.

"So far, so good—but what we wanted to know was still to come.

"'Be very careful now, *Rossignol,*' said Grodin sternly. 'You have spoken the truth up to date: see that you continue doing so.'

"'By the Holy Virgin, M'sieur,' he exclaimed passionately, 'no word but the truth shall pass my lips. And if it does then may I be stricken dead, and have to forego my revenge on that festering sore *le Crapeau.*'

"Grodin glanced at me—that was a bit of news. But he merely told *le Rossignol* curtly to continue.

"It appeared, then, that the Snipe, the Butcher, and Robert were to find their way by cross-country trains to Mamers, from which place they were to go to a wood between there and Alençon.

"'And of those three, Messieurs, I can tell you no more. I saw in the paper that they were dead. How, if I may ask, did you find them?'

"'The Toad gave them away,' I said quietly, and for a moment we thought he was going to have an apoplectic fit. The veins stood out on his forehead, and a flood of the most filthy blasphemy poured out of his lips. We let him finish: as far as his feelings about the Toad were concerned, we had a certain sympathy with him.

"At last he pulled himself together and continued. His orders and the Toad's were to take the car, with the loot inside it, on the road towards

Châtres. After they had gone twenty kilometres, they would find a track leading off to the right. They would know it, because there were three tall trees at the junction. They were to proceed along this track for two kilometres, where they would find a disused quarry. In the quarry was a shed, and in that shed they were to put the car. Under no circumstances were they to move out of the quarry, or light a fire, or attract attention to themselves in any way. But if, by any chance, they were discovered by some wandering pedestrian, the pedestrian was to wander no more. And they would receive further instructions in due course.

"Now I may say at once that we subsequently verified this statement. We found the track, and the quarry, and the actual wheelmarks of the car in the shed.

"Well, it appeared that they sat there the whole of the next day. They had the bread and cheese and wine which *le Bossu Masqué* had ordered them to put in the car, so they were not hungry. And, incidentally, it struck me, even at the time, what astounding attention to detail that little fact showed. For if there is one thing that will overcome fear it is hunger, and but for having given them food one or other of them would most certainly have gone to the nearest village to get it.

"I will now try and continue in the Nightingale's own words.

"'It was about six o'clock, M'sieurs, that it happened. The sun was just setting, so I know the time. I had risen and was standing in the door

of the shed, wondering what we should next be told to do. Suddenly I received the most terrible blow in the back of the neck, and I knew no more.'

"We looked at his neck, and there was an ugly looking scar about two inches long. In fact, anyone except an abnormality like the Nightingale would never have known any more.

"'When I recovered consciousness,' he went on, 'it was dark. At first I didn't know where I was, everything was a blank. And then, little by little, memory came back to me. The quarry—the affair at the chateau—the car. *Mon Dieu!* M'sieurs—sick and faint, I raised myself on my elbow. The car had gone: so had *le Crapeau*. I was alone in the shed. How long I had lain there I knew not: some hours, because the sky was studded with stars. And then there came a voice out of the darkness, and I nearly fainted with horror.

"'"*Rossignol*," it said, "where is the car?"

"'I was not alone: *le Bossu Masqué* was there too.

"'"M'sieur," I cried, "I do not know. That accursed traitor *le Crapeau* struck me from behind with what must have been a spanner. See—I am wet with blood."'

"'And, in truth, I was, gentlemen—soaked with it—my coat, my shirt, everything.'

"'"Accursed fool," went on the voice, and I could dimly see *le Bossu's* outline in the gloom. "Blundering idiot. Do I plan with my great brain this wonderful coup in order that you should allow

yourself to be sandbagged like an English tourist? And by *le Crapeau* of all people."

"'"M'sieur," I pleaded, "I did not suspect him. I was standing in the door wondering what our next instructions would be when he crept on me from behind."

"'"Be silent, worm," he said. "It is well for you, *Rossignol,* that your shirt is soaked with blood. Were it otherwise I might be tempted to think that this was a put-up job between you."

"'"By the blood of the Virgin, M'sieur," I cried, "I swear to you——"

"'"Be silent," he snarled. "I said it was well for you that he hit so hard. It proves to me that you are only a fool and not a traitor. Were you the second, *Rossignol,* I would strangle you here and now with my own hands. As it is, your punishment is sufficient."

"'"But, M'sieur," I cried, "what am I to do?"

"'There was no answer, *le Bossu Masqué* had gone. I was alone now, in very truth—miles from anywhere.'

"So did the Nightingale ramble on. We let him talk, but there was obviously nothing more that he could tell us. He was very incoherent as to dates and times, and I think he undoubtedly remained in that shed in a semi-delirious state for three or four days. How he finally arrived at Rouen we never found out: he hardly seemed to know himself. Anyway, the point was not important.

"He was brought up on a charge of robbery with violence, and sentenced to twenty-one years' imprisonment in Devil's Island. And with that we can leave him for the present. And with that also my story of the quarter of a century ago is practically finished. *Le Rossignol,* with a characteristic outburst of frenzied invective against the Toad, disappeared from the dock into twenty-one years of hell.

"And now, gentlemen, we pass out of the region of certain fact into the region of guesswork. To take the Toad first. I do not think there can be any doubt as to what he did. Overcome by the thought of so much loot, he determined to try and get it all for himself. He laid out the Nightingale, and went off in the car. What happened then we can only surmise. Perhaps he found that he couldn't manage the car: perhaps he lost his nerve. But somewhere in that area of country he hid the stolen stuff. Probably he put in his pocket sufficient jewellery to keep him in comfort for many a long day. But the bulk of the stuff he must have hidden, intending to go back for it when the hue and cry was over. Then he ran the car into a wood, hid it as well as he could, and disappeared. And it is a fact that he did disappear. Years passed by: the war came, but never a trace of the Toad did we see. He vanished from the underworld of Paris as completely as a stone vanishes in the sea. Many people thought he was dead, though, personally, I never agreed with them. But at last the whole thing was forgotten:

even the search for the treasure was abandoned. That had really been hopeless from the first, unless we could lay our hands on the Toad and make him lead us to it.

"As to what happened to *le Bossu Masqué* we are equally in doubt. Many people believed that he had caught the Toad, and had murdered him for his treachery, first compelling him to reveal the hiding-place of the loot. There was a great deal to be said for the theory, though, somehow, I never believed it myself. No body was ever found anywhere which could possibly have been the Toad's. And I felt tolerably certain that a big man like *le Bossu* would never have taken the trouble to follow an object of that sort out of the country merely to kill him. It was the loot he was after—not the Toad. We still felt his activities in Paris, though, as years went by, they seemed to grow less and less. And there are strange stories told of incredible deeds of heroism performed in the war by a masked hunchback, who appeared suddenly in different parts of the line. Fiction, of course, but *le poilu* likes his little bit of mystery—just as your Tommy does.

"And so we come to the present moment, and this strange reunion of the principals in that drama of nearly thirty years ago. As a matter of fact, you will see that it is not quite so strange as it would appear at first sight, but a perfectly logical affair.

"It starts with the release of the Nightingale from Devil's Island five years ago. I was then

working with the police in New York, but not because I had to. I happen to be of independent means, and I work for the love of the thing, not for the salary. And the case of all others that intrigued me most during my whole career was the one I have just told you. It was unsolved : I felt I had been beaten.

"Now I have a fairly good knowledge of the criminal nature. And quite by chance I happened to learn that an uncle of *le Rossignol's* had died leaving his money to his nephew. So I gambled on the result that twenty-one years in Devil's Island would produce on a man like the Nightingale, believing, as he did, that he was there principally because of the Toad's treachery. I chucked up my job, and got on the heels of the Nightingale.

"Well, my guess proved right. He was now, for a man in his position, comparatively affluent, which enabled him to be free from the necessity of working. And, as I thought would prove the case, he was obsessed with one idea, to the exclusion of everything else. And that idea was revenge on the Toad. If *le Crapeau* was still alive he was going to find him.

"Gentlemen, these past few years may seem to you to have been dull : to me they have been fascinating. Backwards and forwards, searching and ferreting, the Nightingale has chased his man. Old companions of twenty years previously have been interrogated : clues have been followed up, only to be discarded. And all the time, unknown to him, I have been sitting on his heels,

patiently waiting. I knew that no one was better qualified to find the Toad than he was. He had access to information that I could never have got: in addition it was the sole driving force of his life.

"It is true, I admit, that at one period, when for months he seemed completely defeated, I very nearly gave it up. And then, quite suddenly out of the blue, there came the message that gave me the greatest thrill of my life. It was proof of what I had always thought in days gone by. Just an envelope handed to me by a *gamin* as I sat outside a café in Paris.

"'Keep out of this.' That was all that was written on the paper: that—and the drawing I hadn't seen for so many years. So *le Bossu Masqué* was not dead: *le Bossu Masqué* was on the trail, too. He also was following the Nightingale: he also was working on the same lines as myself. A strange situation as you will agree: I and that greatest of criminals both using the same dog to hunt our man, and the dog quite unconscious of the fact that he was being so used. It added zest to it, I can assure you. It meant sleeping with one eye permanently open: it meant that the whole time it was necessary to look in every direction, not only at the Nightingale. Several times I sensed his presence near me: how, I can't tell you. And remember the terrible handicap that I was working under. *He knew me, but I didn't know him.*

"However, that is neither here nor there. Just

as the obsession of *le Rossignol's* life was to lay hands on the Toad, so the obsession of mine became the desire to catch *le Bossu Masqué*. It had turned into a duel between him and me. And that duel is now approaching its end."

For a moment or two Victor Matthews fell silent, his eyes fixed on the little drawing still pinned to the tree above my head. And we, enthralled though we were, let him take his own time.

"The rest," he continued after a while, "is fairly soon told. Little by little, from a clue here and a clue there, it became increasingly certain that the Toad had left France. But where had he gone, and had he taken the loot with him? And then came a sudden and astounding stroke of luck. The Nightingale, in the course of his search, had reached Boulogne, and one evening he was sitting in a small wine-shop on the Quai Gambetta. At the next table to him was a French *ouvrier,* and I venture to think that not even the *Bossu Masqué* himself would have recognised me in that excellent workman. The café was fairly empty, and I was on the point of going when two French fishermen came in. They were both a little tight, and their conversation was clearly audible. But what principally attracted my attention was the fact that they obviously were full of money.

"At first I listened idly, and then a stray sentence struck my ear.

"'*Le moulin à Bonneval.*'

"The mill at Bonneval, and Bonneval was the name of a village between Chateaudun and Châtres. Moreover, it was the nearest village to the quarry where the motor-car had been hidden during the day. Isn't it an astounding fact how sometimes, after months and years of fruitless labour, a stray remark casually overheard may provide a clue? As it stood, of course, there was nothing in it—but the coincidence attracted my attention. It was well it did so: amazing though it seems that a chance remark was destined to end our search.

"I stole a glance at the Nightingale: he, too, had caught the phrase, and was listening intently. And after a while, as the full significance of their conversation sank into his mind, he began to quiver like a terrier when it sees a rat. Sometimes the men lowered their voices, but for the most part what they said was clearly audible. And one fact was soon established definitely. These two sailors owned the ketch *Rose Marie,* and they had recently smuggled over a cargo consisting of three large wooden cases, which had been landed on Romney Marsh somewhere between Rye and Dungeness. Further, that these cases had something to do with the mill at Bonneval.

"I give you my word that by this time I was almost as excited as the Nightingale himself. I remembered that there was an old disused mill, standing a little back from the road, about a kilometre north of Bonneval.

"Was it possible that that was the hiding-place

which we had searched for in vain? And if so, who was the recipient of the cases on Romney Marsh?

"Then another thought struck me: was *le Bossu Masqué* present? I glanced round the room: there were only some fisher-folk and a pale youth who looked as if he served in some shop. Honestly I could not think he was there, and yet——"

He waved his hand at the tree behind me.

"However," he continued, "it may be that he wasn't. The Nightingale is an easy man to track, and that may easily account for it. To return to that evening. The two sailors didn't say much more, but what they had said was quite enough to send the Nightingale flying over to England. He has one gift which you probably noticed the night before last—he speaks English fluently. And that was a considerable help to him. It was impossible for him to tell, of course, if the cases had been landed on Romney Marsh because the Toad was near at hand, or simply because it is an admirably situated locality for smuggling."

"Hold hard a moment," said Hugh. "How long ago did you overhear this conversation in the wine shop?"

"About six weeks," answered Matthews. "Rather more. Well, I can't tell you when the Nightingale first discovered that the man he wanted was your next-door neighbour. He's no fool, and presumably his suspicions at once fell

on a house fortified like Temple Tower. So did mine. But the Toad is a secretive gentleman, and suspicion is not proof. Personally, I have not seen the man who now calls himself Granger, though I've lain up for hours waiting for him. I assume that the Nightingale has; at any rate, he has satisfied himself somehow that Granger is the Toad. And so his quest is ended: he has found his enemy. Theatrical as all those people are, he has flashed his warning across the Marsh—red and blue lights, the colours of the gang. For years that man—ever since *le Rossignol* was liberated from Devil's Island—has lived in fear of being found. And now he has been."

Young Freckles took a deep breath.

"I say, chaps," he remarked, "we are having a jolly party, aren't we? And how do the Beaver and the girl come in?"

"I was just coming to them," said Matthews. "Paul Vandali is one of those men, well-known to the police to be criminals, who have yet succeeded in steering clear of trouble. The only commandment they keep is the eleventh—thou shalt not be found out. The lady has not, I think, ever been united to Vandali in the holy bonds of matrimony, but she has been his inseparable companion for three years."

"I suppose he is not the *Bossu Masqué?*" I asked.

Matthews shook his head.

"Quite impossible," he said. "He is not old enough. Vandali is a man of only about thirty-

five. So that rules him out. Oh, no! He comes in in a very different way. I have mentioned, if you remember, the Prince's cousin, who chose his parties for him. Now that cousin is also the Prince's heir, and he is alive to-day in Paris. He inherited all the Prince's money, and so is an extremely wealthy man. After the affair at the Chateau du Lac Noir, he offered an enormous reward for the recovery of the stolen property—no less than fifty thousand pounds. Naturally he, years ago, gave up all hope of getting it back, though the reward still stood. And then Vandali and the lady appeared on the scene. You have seen them, and you will realise that they are people who are quite at home in the highest society. At any rate, they met Count Vladimar—that is the cousin—at supper one night not very long ago. And the conversation came round to the affair at the Chateau du Lac Noir. My informant was the waiter—who was not a waiter. To be more explicit, the Paris police were after Vandali over a little matter at Nice. They had no proof, but they were trying to trap him in an unguarded moment. And the waiter was really a detective.

"Well, he got nothing from the meal which helped him over the Nice business, but what he did get was that Vladimar most categorically stated that the reward of fifty thousand pounds still held good. He said it with a laugh, almost as if he implied that it might just as well be a million for the good it would do. But the detective

caught a very significant glance that passed between the two. And here they are.

"How they spotted this place I can't tell you. It may be that they, too, through friends in the underworld, have kept themselves posted in the Nightingale's movements, realising, as I did, that in him lay their best chance of being led to the treasure. At any rate, they are here."

Matthews paused and lit a cigarette.

"Well, gentlemen, so much for the past, and the original causes that have led up to the situation as it stands to-day. Of my doings since I have been here there is little to say. I have told you that the main obsession of my life is to lay hands on the man who nearly murdered me to-night. And I have been lying up in a small place in Rye, watching and waiting for what I knew must happen, sooner or later—his arrival. I have kept my eye on *le Rossignol:* you saw me the other night when I very foolishly got caught in the light. But until to-night I did not know *le Bossu* was here. I don't know quite what took me up there—restlessness, perhaps, or something deeper. It sounds strange, I know," his voice grew almost solemn, "but I veritably believe, though I have never seen him until to-night, that there is some channel of communication between him and me which cannot be explained by any natural means. Gentlemen, I have felt him near me in Paris: I know it. And to-night an overmastering impulse took me to Temple Tower. You know with what result. Suddenly I saw him

—looming out of the darkness—right on top of me. And although I had half expected it, the shock at the moment was almost paralysing. I even forgot to draw my gun till it was too late: he had gone."

He paused, and a dreamy look came into his eyes.

"But he is here, and I am here, and this time it is the end, one way or the other."

For a moment or two no one spoke: there was something almost awe-inspiring in the quiet finality of his words. Just as at Spragge's Farm, the soft melodious voice of *le Rossignol* had seemed to ring Granger's death knell, so, now, did this second deadly hatred promise a fight to the finish.

"Enough, gentlemen," he went on in his normal voice. "No good has ever come of dreaming. Will you now return the compliment, and tell me what has happened to you? Then we will draw up a plan of campaign and decide what to do."

We told him everything: about the chimney-pot episode, the sparking plugs, the stolen map, and Miss Verney's letter. And when we had finished, he smoked a complete cigarette before he spoke.

"Captain Drummond," he said quietly, "I congratulate you. I think your deductions are absolutely correct. Whether he meant to kill you with the chimney-pot, or only put you out of the way temporarily, is immaterial—but that was his

first idea. And I think your appearance on the scene has changed all his plans. He has only just arrived, of that I am sure. He came expecting to find *le Rossignol* and me : instead, he finds all of you, to say nothing of the Vandalis."

He rose and began pacing up and down, his face working eagerly as he emphasised each point.

"What is the result? Merely that time becomes all important. He hears of the map belonging to Sir John : he steals it. Not knowing of the verse behind, he thinks that he has solved the method of getting in to Temple Tower. And he was looking for the entrance to-night when the dog found him. Probably alarmed by the din the animal made, he hid for a while near by, and it was then that Gaspard stumbled on him, only to be strangled. Who knows why he did that? It is possible he did not know you were in the grounds, and thought he might gain access to the house by pretending to be Gaspard : it is possible he had no alternative. But of one thing, gentlemen, I am very sure : time is now even more all important to *le Bossu* than it was a few hours ago.

"In view of the fact that he did not gain access to the house, the killing of Gaspard was an error —a bad error. But it is done and cannot be undone. And of another thing I am very sure, too." His voice grew grave, and he stared over the Marsh thoughtfully. "If you heard the Vandalis' programme, Mr. Darrell, so did he. And I do not

think it would find favour in his eyes—far from it. I hold no brief for either of them, but——"

He said no more, but the little shrug of his shoulders filled in the silence more ominously than any spoken word.

"Had he got into the house to-night, the Vandalis would not have mattered. But he didn't, and now they do. However, they can look after themselves: the point we have to decide is what we are going to do. Shall we call in the police, or shall we not? There are, it seems to me, two main objections. The first is this: What are we going to tell them? Nothing that we can do can bring the man Gaspard back to life, and if we tell them anything, we must tell them all. And frankly, gentlemen, though you are, of course, the best judges of that, I think an account of your recent doings, told in cold blood at a police station, might prove a little awkward."

"I know the Inspector pretty well," said Hugh, "but perhaps you are right."

"The other objection," went on Matthews, "is this. And to me it is a far bigger one. If we tell the police, and they take the matter up, we drop out, or at any rate you do. And"—he thumped his fist into his open palm—"for the local police to try and tackle *le Bossu* is about equivalent to asking a board school child to explain Einstein's Theory. They are naturally trammelled by the law, and *le Bossu* would laugh at them. No, gentlemen, the only way of catching him, if you are prepared to do it, is for us to join

forces and act outside the law on our own. Keep the police out of it, and we will catch him. Let them in, and our hands are tied."

"My dear fellow," said Hugh with a grin, "no one loathes the idea of letting the police in more than I do. But do not forget there is a lady involved."

"I don't," remarked Matthews gravely, and turned to young Freckles. "I quite appreciate your position, Mr. Scott. But I am going to say something which I hope you will not consider impertinent. There is a reward of fifty thousand pounds at stake. Wait, please"—he held up his hand, as Freckles started to speak—"and then bite me afterwards. Captain Drummond, if I may say so, hardly seems to be a gentleman in need of money. I am in this show for one reason only—to get to grips with *le Bossu*. If between us we find that property, we get fifty thousand pounds. And do not be under any delusion. Count Vladimar can pay that sum without feeling it. Which brings me to my point. Your fiancée can be of invaluable assistance to us in finding it, and as a natural result would be entitled to the whole reward. Please understand me, Mr. Scott," he continued with a smile, which robbed his words of any offence. "But young ladies do not as a general rule take on jobs of that sort if their future husbands are wealthy."

"My dear old lad," laughed Freckles, "we haven't got a blinking bean between us, if that is what you mean."

"Then here is an unprecedented opportunity of getting fifty thousand of the best," said Matthews.

"Be a bit more explicit," said Hugh after a pause.

"*Le Bossu* will return to Temple Tower," said Matthews quietly. "You disturbed him last night, but there is no power in Heaven or Hell that will deter that man from doing what he has come here to do. He may or may not kill *le Crapeau,* according to the mood he is in : but he has come to get the stuff stolen twenty-five years ago—the stuff which, as Captain Drummond says, Miss Verney has been engaged to sell. Well, gentlemen, my suggestion is this. Let us lie up and wait for him. In the past we have always laboured under the disadvantage of not knowing where he would turn up : this time that disadvantage is gone. We know exactly, and all we have to do is to wait for him. And this time," he added softly, "we are going to catch him. What do you say?"

Hugh glanced round at all of us.

"It seems to me," he said, "that Scott must decide."

"Well, old birds," answered Freckles, "it seems to me that if five of us can't tackle this bloke, the addition of a couple of policemen isn't going to help much. I'm all for Mr. Matthews' suggestion."

"Good," cried Hugh. "Then that's that. What do you want, Denny?"

The butler had come out of the house in an obvious state of suppressed excitement.

"Have you heard sir, what they've found in the wood opposite Temple Tower?"

"No," said Hugh quietly. "What?"

"A dead man, sir. Hidden in the bushes. A terrible looking thing he was, so the postman told me—more like a great monkey than a man. They say that he has been stopping at Spragge's Farm."

For a moment or two there was silence: then Victor Matthews spoke.

"How was he killed?" he asked.

And I think we all knew the answer before it came.

"Murdered, sir, so I hear. From the marks round his neck they say he was strangled."

CHAPTER IX

IN WHICH I MEET "LE BOSSU MASQUÉ"

SO *le Rossignol* had been there after all. His dead body must have been quite close to us during the hour we had lain up waiting, before we found that the ladder had gone. And horrible and repulsive though he had been, I could not help feeling a twinge of pity for the poor brute. I could imagine him there in the darkness of the wood searching for the rope ladder he had made so laboriously, and then suddenly feeling the grip of the silent strangler on his throat. Perhaps that same choking cry that Gaspard had given—and then silence.

"Your friend," said Hugh grimly, when the butler had gone, "is evidently no believer in half measures."

Matthews was silent: this new development seemed to have nonplussed him. He paced up and down with quick, nervous steps, and a look of frowning concentration on his face.

"This alters things, gentlemen," he said at length. "Now the police must come into the affair."

"True," remarked Hugh. "At the same time, I don't see why we should run round telling them what we know. In fact, it makes it even more difficult to do so, because we lay ourselves open to grave blame for not having in-

formed them about what we knew of the Nightingale's intentions."

"That is so," said Matthews thoughtfully. "And as a matter of fact, it is even worse for me. Strictly speaking, if only as a matter of courtesy, I should have informed them of my presence here, and what I was doing. Instead of that, I am passing as an ordinary tourist. You are right, Captain Drummond. We must still say nothing about it. And there, going along the road, if I'm not mistaken, is the local inspector."

Hugh started to his feet.

"I'll get him in," he exclaimed, going towards the gate.

"Please don't mention who I am," called Matthews after him, and Hugh nodded in answer.

"Hullo! Inspector," he hailed, "what's this I hear about someone being murdered?"

"Quite right, sir," said the other gravely, halting by the gate. "Just come from there myself."

"Come in and have a spot of ale," said Hugh, "and tell us all about it. I think you know Sir John, don't you? And these are three other friends of mine."

"A bad business, gentlemen," said the Inspector, putting down his glass. "Very bad. And as far as I can see at present, there is no trace of a clue."

"What happened?" asked Hugh. "I've heard vaguely from my butler, who had heard vaguely from the postman."

"It was Joe Mellor that found him, sir—him that keeps the dairy farm along the road there. Found him quite by accident, he did: or rather, not him, but his dog. He was walking past Temple Tower, and his dog was in the wood opposite. Suddenly it began to bark and make a rare blather, and Joe went in to see what was happening. He found the dog standing by some bushes, and, when he looked closer, he saw a man's leg sticking out. The rest of the body was carefully covered, and Joe tells me that he'd never have seen it but for the dog. He gives a pull on the leg and hauls out the body. Well, gentlemen, in the course of my life I've run across some pretty queer customers, but I give you my word that the dead man is the queerest. He don't look like a man at all: he looks like a great ape. A terrible face he's got, and not improved by the manner of his death. He was strangled, and the face is all red and puffy."

"You've got no clue at all?" asked Hugh. "No idea who the man is?"

"None at present, sir," answered the Inspector. "But I shall soon. Bill Matcham, who works down on the Marsh, happened to be passing, and the instant he saw him he recognised him as a man who had been lodging at Spragge's place. Maybe you know the farm, sir?"

"Vaguely," said Hugh casually. "Somewhere down there, isn't it?"

He waved a comprehensive hand at the Marsh.

"That's right, sir. And Spragge himself is a

queer customer. Well, I don't mind if I do, sir." He took the refilled glass from Hugh. "Hot work this morning."

"By the way," said Matthews speaking for the first time, "for how long had this man been dead?"

"The doctor said somewhere about twelve hours, sir," answered the Inspector.

"So it happened last night," cried Hugh, in affected surprise.

"That's right, sir; last night sometime round about ten o'clock this man was strangled and his body hidden in the wood by Temple Tower."

"You've got something in your mind, Inspector," said Hugh quietly.

"Well, sir, we're all of us entitled to our thoughts, and maybe I have mine. Ever see anything of Mr. Granger, sir?"

Hugh smiled slightly.

"So that's how it is, is it? I can't say I do, Inspector. I've met him out walking once or twice, that's all."

"A queer gentleman, sir: very queer. Who ever heard before of a man coming to live in a place like this and fortifying his house with all them steel spikes and things, to say nothing of the bars all over the windows?"

The worthy officer put down his glass and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

"Well, gentlemen, I must be going. This affair is going to keep me busy."

"But surely you don't suspect that Mr.

Granger had anything to do with it?" said Hugh.

"I don't suspect no one, sir," answered the other. "All I say is that Mr. Granger is a queer customer, and this is a queer affair."

"A most sapient conclusion," remarked Matthews with a faint smile as the gate shut behind the Inspector. "One wonders what the worthy man would think if he knew that a precisely similar corpse lay inside the fortifications."

"One also wonders," said Hugh quietly, "what steps our Mr. Granger is going to take over that similar corpse."

But any surmises on that point proved unnecessary, for at that moment who should appear at the gate but Miss Verney. Even at that distance one could see that she was in a state of great agitation, and she had left Temple Tower in such a hurry that she had come without a hat. And as she stood there for a moment the Inspector returned and joined her. Then they both came towards us.

"She's found Gaspard's body," said Matthews with quiet conviction. "Be very careful what all of you say."

And he proved to be right. It appeared that, going out after breakfast, the first thing that had struck her was that the dog's kennel was empty. And then, in the distance, she had seen the brute lying asleep as she thought. For a time she had watched it, ready to dart back to the house if

it moved. But after a while it had struck her that from its attitude it couldn't be asleep: one hind leg was sticking straight up in the air, and she had approached it cautiously to find that it was dead.

"I was so amazed," she went on, "that for a moment or two I just stood there staring at it. There was no sign of blood, or of any wound, and so I guessed it must have been poisoned. But who by? I had heard it baying furiously in the middle of the night, and then it suddenly stopped and there wasn't another sound. Still trying to puzzle it out, I walked on into the undergrowth. And there I found"—she grew a little white at the recollection, and her voice trembled—"the body of the servant Gaspard. He looked too awful, with his face all red and terrible. And I simply lost my head and flew to the gate and came here."

"An extraordinarily wise proceeding, Miss Verney," said Hugh quietly.

"May I ask who this young lady is?" said the Inspector.

"Miss Verney was engaged to do secretarial work for Mr. Granger," answered Freckles. "And her engagement is now terminated," he concluded firmly.

"This is most extraordinary," said the Inspector, scratching his head with a pencil. "I must go back there at once. One inside and——"

"Quite so, Inspector," interrupted Hugh with a warning sign. "But Miss Verney is a bit tired

at the moment. I'll stroll with you to the gate. Come along, Peter. There is no good upsetting her any more," he went on as we got out of earshot, "by telling her about the other."

"What do you make of it, sir?" said the Inspector as we came to the road.

"Well, from what Miss Verney said," remarked Hugh, "it would appear as if the servant Gaspard had also been strangled. And if that is so, the strong presumption is that the same man did both murders, and poisoned the dog."

The Inspector nodded portentiously, and then lowered his voice impressively.

"What did I tell you, sir; what did I tell you? Mr. Granger is a queer customer."

"Queer customer he may be," answered Hugh. "But one thing is as certain as that gate in front of us. He had nothing to do with the two murders. With his physique, he could no more have strangled Gaspard than he could have strangled me."

"I don't say he did it, sir," said the other, "but you mark my words, he could tell a lot about it if he chose to."

"I wouldn't be surprised if you're not right," said Hugh gravely. "Drop in on your way back and let us know if you find out anything."

For a while we stood leaning over the gate, watching his retreating back.

"What do you make of it, Peter?" said Hugh suddenly.

"It is one of the most extraordinary affairs

I've ever heard of," I answered. "Even with Matthews' explanation it's amazing enough: without it, as the Inspector is, no wonder he is scratching his head. It's a mighty lucky thing that *le Bossu* missed him."

"Mighty lucky," he agreed, lighting a cigarette. "He strikes me as being an extraordinarily sound sort of bloke. Extraordinarily sound," he repeated, as we started to walk back to the house. "In fact, I was proposing to ask him to come and stay here."

"Not at all a bad idea," I agreed. "Then we're all on the spot together."

We found him alone with John, the other two having disappeared somewhere, and Hugh at once proposed it.

"That's very good of you, Captain Drummond," he said. "But, frankly speaking, I don't think there will be much staying."

"What do you mean?" said Hugh, looking puzzled.

"Simply that matters have come to a head," he answered. "I am as certain as I can be of anything that *le Bossu* never intended to be in Rye to-day. He murdered *le Rossignol,* and then got into the grounds by the ladder, believing that, once he was inside, Sir John's plan would enable him to find the secret entrance. It didn't. Then the dog came for him and disturbed the household. Then Gaspard came, and he murdered him, once again believing that he would be able to get into the house—this time by the front door. And

what defeated him was your sudden appearance. I know I've said much the same before, but when one is dealing with a man of his calibre there's no harm in being clear in one's head. He didn't mind in the slightest if these two murders were discovered *after* he had settled things with the Toad: but now the discovery has been made *before* the settlement. And that is why I say matters have come to a head and there won't be much staying before the end comes. We are going to find things moving at breakneck speed, and the only comfort is that even *le Bossu* can't do anything by day. But I think you can dismiss the idea of sleep at night for the next day or two."

"That's not likely to worry us," said Hugh. "And I quite see your point. Still, the offer holds if you care to make this house your head-quarters."

"Thank you again," answered Matthews. "I won't bother to move my kit here, but if I may drop in when I want to I shall greatly appreciate it. And if I may stay now for a little lunch I should be most grateful."

"Of course, my dear fellow," cried Hugh. "And in view of our rather erratic time-table and hours at the moment, I'm rather in favour of a bit of food at once. It's twelve o'clock."

He shouted for Denny, who, accustomed as he was to Hugh's vagaries, betrayed no astonishment. And then, whilst we waited, we went on discussing from every angle what was likely to be

the next move. With his previous knowledge of *le Bossu,* it was only natural that Victor Matthews should take the lead, but even he confessed himself beaten. How was the silent strangler to rectify his mistake?

"*Le Bossu* knows," he said, "as every other criminal knows, that the English police, once they get their teeth into a thing, never let it go. They may chew slowly, but they chew surely. And he must know that the discovery of these two murders is going to make the police swarm round Temple Tower, which is the last place he wants them at. So what is he going to do? Because he'll do something: of that you can rest assured."

And it is safe to say that not one of us there, in our wildest dreams, would have guessed what *le Bossu* did do that very afternoon—so staggering was it in its simplicity, so incredible in its ferocity. But of that in its proper place.

Lunch was over, and the first problem to be settled was what the girl was to do. She, on hearing the whole story, was as keen as mustard on helping, but Freckles—in fact, all of us—were absolutely opposed to her returning to Temple Tower. She already knew, at any rate, one of the secret hiding-places of the stolen jewels, and though she offered to go back, we vetoed it unanimously. And, finally, it was decided that she should stop at Hugh's house for the present at any rate, with Freckles as her guard, an arrangement which seemed to satisfy everybody

concerned. John had decided to motor back to Laidley Towers, returning again in the evening, and as soon as he heard that, Victor Matthews asked for a lift to Rye. He was of the opinion that developments might take place there in connection with the two murders, and he had decided, if necessary, to tell the police something, if not all, of what he had told us that morning. Later, John might pick him up on his way back.

"What are you going to do, Hugh?" I said.

"I dunno, old lad," he answered. "Don't you worry about me."

And sure enough he disappeared soon after lunch and I was left to my own resources.

At first I tried to sleep, but I soon gave up the attempt. Sleep simply would not come, and after a while I decided to go for a walk. I gathered from Denny that there was a short cut over the fields which led to Rye, and with the idea of possibly getting a lift back in John's car I struck out along it. There was always a chance, I thought, of finding out something, and if not, Rye was a town well worth exploring.

It was a drowsily warm afternoon, and I walked slowly, my thoughts full of Matthews' astounding story. It seemed wellnigh unbelievable that this amazing crime of a generation ago should have its dénouement in such a peaceful English setting. Who was he—this sinister being—who had baffled the whole French police force? Had we seen him in the Dolphin the night before? Was he the clergyman, as Hugh had half suggested?

Futile surmises: if Matthews didn't know, it was hardly likely that I should. But the problem haunted me: I couldn't get it out of my thoughts. And suddenly I arrived at a decision. I would stroll round Rye, and then go to the Dolphin for tea. With luck I might find the little room empty, in which case I would investigate the fireplace, and see if there was anything in Hugh's theory. It could do no harm, and it gave me an object for the afternoon. Possibly even, I might solve the problem of the identity of *le Bossu* himself.

A neighbouring clock struck three, and shortly after I reached the outskirts of the town. I strolled aimlessly round, looking into old curiosity shops for about half an hour: then, striking up the hill, I made for the Dolphin. Once I thought I saw Victor Matthews in the distance, but I wasn't sure, and I wondered how his line of inquiries was progressing.

The hall was deserted when I entered: so, fortunately, was the little room. And I made a dive at once for the fireplace. It was, as I have already said, an enormous affair, in which it was easy to stand with one's head and shoulders up the flue. I peered upwards, but could see nothing. Evidently there was a jink in the chimney which stopped the light. At any rate there was only blackness to be seen.

"Do you require tea, sir?"

I emerged hurriedly, to find a waiter staring at me.

"Please," I said, feeling remarkably foolish. "A wonderful fireplace, this."

"Yes, sir. It is very famous."

He stalked from the room, leaving me with the uncomfortable feeling that he regarded me with grave suspicion. Admittedly the beauties of the fireplace were best seen from the outside: at the same time I failed to see any reason why I shouldn't stand inside it if I wished to. However, having satisfied himself on his return that the fireplace was still there, he thawed somewhat under the influence of a substantial tip.

"Hotel pretty full?" I said casually.

"Yes, sir. They comes and goes," he answered. "Week-ends we're always full up, but we've got some rooms now if you want one."

His interest waned when he found I didn't, and after a while he drifted away to some new arrivals in the hall. They were obviously American tourists motoring through, and therefore could be given a clean bill of health as far as I was concerned. Presumably, also, the waiter might be excluded, though his case was not quite so certain. I had already made up my mind that the most unlikely person would prove to be the man we wanted, and that even women must not be ruled out. After all, men had masqueraded in female clothes before now.

Other people came drifting in, and I eyed them all like a lynx. And then, after a while, the absurdity of the proceeding struck me: how could I possibly know? It was more than likely that *le*

Bossu had already left the hotel, even assuming he had ever been there.

Suddenly my interest revived: Vandali and the girl had come into the hall. For a moment or two they seemed undecided as to where they would sit: then they turned and came into the little room. The girl swept past me as if unconscious of my existence, but Vandali gave me a curt bow.

"Been doing any more botanising?" he said sarcastically.

"Been getting the Yuletide welcome at Temple Tower again?" I returned.

He paused and stared at me, and I thought for a moment that he was going to have an actual discussion. Then apparently he thought better of it and he passed on and joined the girl. I picked up a paper and pretended to read. It was a day old but I wanted a screen from behind which I could study them. They had begun to talk in low tones, and it was impossible to hear more than an odd word or two. But it seemed to me that he was urging some line of action on her, and that she was opposed to it. What it was I had no idea, but once I distinctly heard him mention the word "police." I strained my ears, but they were sitting too far away. Only it became increasingly obvious that there was a fundamental difference of opinion between them over something, and that neither could apparently convert the other.

I laid down the paper and lit a cigarette. There did not seem to be much object in waiting any

longer. I could not move closer to them without making things obvious, and they were evidently not going to raise their voices. And I was on the point of getting up when some dirt fell down the chimney at the end of the room and lay in a little heap on the whitened hearthstone. A very ordinary phenomenon, and yet—was it? I felt my pulse begin to go a little quicker. Had that dirt fallen naturally, or had it been disturbed by something? Was the hidden listener even now at his post? And yet how could he be unless he was in the room?

The other two had noticed nothing. For about five minutes they continued their conversation: then, shrugging his shoulders irritably, the man got up and left the room, whilst the girl picked up an illustrated weekly. In a fever of impatience I waited for her to go too: I wanted to have another look up the chimney. But apparently she had no intention of following her companion's example, and after a time she took out her cigarette-case.

I watched her out of the corner of my eye, as she began to hunt in her bag for a match. And it suddenly struck me that the opportunity was too good to miss.

"Allow me," I said, rising and striking one for her.

She thanked me, and a little to my surprise she laid down her paper as if quite ready to talk.

"A ghastly affair," I said, "these two murders."

"Two!" she cried, staring at me blankly. "Two!"

"Yes," I said. "One outside, and one inside the grounds of Temple Tower."

And now it was obvious that not only was the information a surprise to her, but it was a very agitating surprise.

"I heard of one," she said, "the one outside. But, tell me, who was murdered inside?"

"Mr. Granger's servant—a man called Gaspard. It appears that both men were strangled."

"But this is amazing," she cried. "You're sure it wasn't Mr. Granger who was killed?"

"Perfectly sure," I said. "The police are investigating both crimes now."

A look of relief appeared on her face, though her bewilderment was still obvious, and I tried to read the situation by the light of my inside knowledge of the Vandalis' plans. The reason for the relief was clear: it would have complicated things for them considerably if Granger had been dead.

"It is incredible," she said once again. "Who on earth killed the man outside?"

"The same person presumably who killed the one inside," I answered, but her remark, phrased as it was, threw a sudden ray of light on what she was thinking and the reason for her surprise at my news. Evidently she must have assumed that *le Rossignol* had been murdered by Gaspard. And the information that Gaspard himself was dead completely nonplussed her. So much was apparent: what was not clear was whether or not

she knew of *le Bossu*. Her expression at the moment seemed to be that of a person who had heard an inexplicable piece of news: but surely if she knew of *le Bossu* the matter ceased to be inexplicable at once. And as we continued to discuss the thing, I began more and more to feel sure that she did *not* know of the silent strangler. Which only tended to make it more baffling.

If Hugh's surmise was right: if our plans had been overheard by someone listening in the chimney, and if, further, the Vandalis' room was the one overhead, something must be wrong somewhere. He had put his theory forward when the idea was that the person who had heard our plans was the very woman I was talking to. Of course, it might well be that there was no one there at the moment, and that the dirt had fallen accidentally. And even as I thought so, some more fell down the chimney and lay in a little heap on the whitened hearthstone.

"I beg your pardon," I said, suddenly conscious that she had asked a question and was expecting an answer. "I didn't quite catch your remark."

"I asked if you knew anything about this man Granger?" she said.

"I fear I am only a stranger here," I answered lightly. "He seems a man of curious disposition."

"Is it worth while," she said coldly, "lying in quite such a stupid fashion? A man does not go and conceal himself beside the road on a hot summer's day for fun."

"Is it worth while," I answered equally coldly, "calling a man a liar until you are quite certain of your facts? The reason for my concealment, as you call it, was simple. Mr. Granger has recently engaged a secretary. She happens to be the fiancée of the youngster who was with me. And in view of the type of house it had been arranged that she should throw a letter over the wall telling him if she was all right. Hence our presence there."

She stared at me suspiciously, but with the serene confidence of having told the truth—or very nearly—I returned the look blandly.

"You mean to say that that is all you were there for?" she cried.

"What else is there to be there for?" I countered.

"A man doesn't fortify himself like that unless he is afraid of something," she said.

"Some such idea had occurred to me," I agreed.

For a while she smoked in silence: then she seemed to come to a sudden decision.

"What do you think he is afraid of?" she demanded.

"Presumably the entrance of callers," I remarked.

"Shall we cease to beat about the bush, Monsieur?" she said quietly. "For I really cannot believe that your ignorance is quite so profound as you make out."

"If it enabled me to talk a little longer with

you, Madame," I replied, "I would wish it were even more profound."

She waved aside the clumsy compliment with a frown.

"You know who the man is who was found murdered in the wood." The remark was a statement, not a question.

"Let us suppose for the moment that I do. What then?"

"Why, then you must know everything," she cried irritably. "Why not come out into the open, Monsieur? There is plenty for all of us. And now that he is dead there is no hurry. We can take our time."

At last her meaning was clear, and with it the absolute certainty that she was ignorant of the existence of *le Bossu*. She believed that, with the murder of *le Rossignol,* the only people left to share the reward for the stolen property were themselves and us. But one thing it seemed to me she had overlooked even from her own point of view.

"Madame," I remarked, "we agreed, I think, that the object of the fortification was to keep out callers, and it would not appear to have been successful. Someone must have been inside the grounds last night."

"Precisely," she said, staring me straight in the face. "And that someone must have been a very powerful man. Almost as powerful as your friend who was in here a night or two ago."

For a moment I did not take her meaning.

Then it suddenly dawned on me, and I burst out laughing.

"My dear lady," I cried, "you surely are not accusing us of having pulled off a double murder, are you? That is a bit too rich altogether."

She rose without answering, and with a feeling of relief I realised she was going. There was nothing more to be gained by prolonging the conversation, and I wanted to have another look up the chimney. It was certainly not my intention to enlighten her over *le Bossu,* and if she chose to pretend to me that she thought we had murdered Gaspard and *le Rossignol,* she was quite at liberty to do so.

I watched her step out into the hall, and stand there for a moment or two as if undecided where to go: then she turned and ascended the stairs. And I, after a swift look round to make sure I was unobserved, made a dart for the chimney. And this time it was not all darkness: Hugh was right.

About six feet above my head was a square opening through which a faint light was filtering. And even as I stared at it something moved behind it, and I saw a pair of savage eyes staring down into mine. Then they were gone, and I stepped out into the room again.

My pulse was beating a shade faster than usual, but my brain was perfectly cool. What was the next move? That those eyes had belonged to *le Bossu Masqué* himself I felt sure, but what was going to happen now? According

to Hugh, the Vandalis' room was above us, and Madame Vandali had just gone upstairs. So that she would be bound to find him, and what then? Because, from my reading of the case, she didn't know of his existence.

I waited—but there was no sound. Then I took another look up the chimney, but this time all was darkness. And after a while another thought struck me. If, as I believed, the Vandalis did not know about him, would he have dared to go into their room?

I went quickly out into the hall and looked upstairs. True enough, Number 18 was over the little room where we had been talking, and so far Hugh was right. But he had not seen the position of the opening in the chimney, and I had. And I saw at once that that opening could not have been made from Number 18, but must have come from the room next it. Number 19 was *le Bossu's* room—not 18. The door was shut, and for a moment I had an insane impulse to stroll casually up the stairs, open the door, and walk in. I could pretend I had come into the wrong room by mistake, and he could not do me any harm in the Dolphin.

However, I decided against it, and walked over to the Visitors' Book. There was the entry right enough: "H. Thomas, London. No. 19."

"I see you have a Mr. Thomas staying here," I said to the girl. "I wonder if that is the Harold Thomas I used to play golf with? Is he a big man with a slight stoop?"

"He is a biggish man, but I don't think he stoops," she answered.

"Fair moustache?" I asked.

"I think he is clean shaven," she replied. "I really couldn't say for sure. But I expect he will be back for dinner."

"He is not in the hotel, then?" I said quietly.

"No. I haven't seen him all day."

She turned to a new arrival, and I went back into the annexe. What was to be done now? That the man who called himself Thomas was in the hotel I knew. But it was manifestly impossible for me to tell the girl how I knew it. If a man lays claim to having seen eyes peering at him out of chimneys, his audience is more than likely to make rude insinuations concerning alcohol. And yet it was utterly imperative that, somehow or other, I should see inside Number 19. How to do it: that was the problem.

I wandered restlessly back into the hall: what about sitting down in a spot which commanded a view of the room? And to my amazement I found, on looking up, that the door was open. Mechanically I ordered a whisky and soda: how did that fact affect things? Did it mean that the owner of Number 19 had gone out in reality, or what?

I finished my drink, and as I laid down the glass I came to a decision. I would go up and walk straight into the room. If there was any unpleasantness I could pretend that I thought it was my mythical Harold Thomas and apologise

for my intrusion. But I should have seen the man we wanted: and that, so it seemed to me, was worth a big risk.

There was no one about, and so, putting a bold face on it, I walked straight up the stairs. Then for a moment I admit I hesitated: visions of being arrested as an hotel thief floated before me. But I banished them, and with a preliminary knock on the door, I went into Number 19.

There was no one in it, and I glanced quickly round. A weather-beaten suitcase stood in one corner: on the bed lay a pair of pyjamas. A man's toilet accessories—hair brushes, shaving gear, and the like—adorned the dressing-table. In fact, it was without exception the least suspicious looking room I have even been in. And then I suddenly became aware of a most peculiar noise. It came from the next room, and it sounded as if someone was drumming with his feet on the partition wall. It came fitfully, and then, after a while, it died away altogether, save for an occasional bump.

With its cessation I pulled myself together: there was no good my remaining there now that I had found the room empty. The bluff about Mr. Harold Thomas was all very well, but not having found him at home there was no excuse for my remaining in his room. I must go down and resume my watch in the hall.

And even as I came to that conclusion I happened to look in the glass in front of me. I could see over my shoulder the room behind me.

The door was slowly shutting. With a great effort I forced myself to look round. Evidently Mr. Thomas had returned.

But it wasn't Mr. Thomas. Standing almost on top of me was a masked figure, that in the fading light seemed of monstrous size. In a flash I took in the hump on his back, realised it was *le Bossu Masqué* himself, and then his hands shot out and he got my throat. I struggled wildly, and I am not generally considered a weakling. But in that man's hands I might have been a child. The silent strangler had got me.

Soon there came a roaring in my ears, and still the grip held. I was losing consciousness: he was throttling me. And the last thing I remember before everything went black was the look of fierce triumph in his eyes.

CHAPTER X

IN WHICH "LE BOSSU" RETRIEVES HIS ERROR

WHEN I came to myself, for a moment or two I could recall nothing. Then in a wave it all came back to me. Once again I saw that terrible figure crouching over me, and felt those vicelike hands on my throat.

Feeling a little dazed and sick, I scrambled to my feet. Of my assailant, there was no sign: the room was empty. And then another thing struck me: the kit that had been lying about was no longer there. Everything had gone, including the suitcase.

For a while I sat on the bed trying to pull myself together. My neck was most infernally sore: undoubtedly *le Bossu* well deserved his second nickname of the Strangler. Because it was useless to blind myself to the fact that had he wished to kill me he could easily have done so. Luckily he had not so wished, and I was still alive, but it was not due to any prowess on my part. He had decided to make me unconscious whilst he packed his things and left the hotel, and had calmly proceeded to do so.

I glanced at my watch: it was seven o'clock. I had been unconscious for roughly an hour. And it was as I replaced it in my pocket that my eye was caught by a big piece of folded paper lying half under the bed. I picked it up mechanically, and opened it out. And then, for a time, I stood

gazing at it, literally unable to believe my eyes. It was the actual plan of Temple Tower which had been stolen from Laidley Towers the preceding night. I turned it over: on the back were written some lines in pencil.

I crossed to the window to examine it better: then, on second thoughts, I crammed it in my pocket. There would be plenty of time to study it later: the immediate necessity was to get out of the room. I calculated that he must have dropped it inadvertently when packing, and once he discovered his loss he would almost certainly return for it. And I had no wish whatever to encounter the gentleman by myself again. True, I could accuse him of half murdering me, but who was there to prove it? A stiff neck gives no outward and visible sign of its existence; it would only be my word against his. Whereas it would be obvious to all concerned that I was in a room where I had no right to be.

I opened the door cautiously and peered out. And with a sigh of relief I saw that no one was about. Even if I was seen leaving the room I should render myself liable to suspicion, but luck was with me. And ten seconds later I was in the hall again, with the precious plan in my pocket. There was no hurry now: I could afford to take my time. And the best thing to do, it struck me, was to inquire into Mr. Thomas' movements. So I walked over to the office.

"By the way," I said to the girl, "has Mr. Thomas returned yet?"

She looked at me in some surprise.

"Mr. Thomas paid his bill and left half an hour ago," she said. "He didn't say anything about coming back."

"I must have misunderstood his plans," I remarked. "Did he say if he was returning to London?"

"He didn't say anything," said the girl. "But he can't get back to London to-night from here. The last train has gone."

I thanked her and let the subject drop. There was nothing more to be got out of her, and it seemed to me that she was already looking at me a little curiously. What had happened was clear. After laying me out he had calmly packed his kit and walked out of the hotel. And we were none of us any nearer knowing what he looked like than we were before. That was the sickening part of it. But I'd got the plan, and that was worth half a dozen stiff necks. I sat down in a secluded spot and ordered the largest whisky and the smallest soda that the hotel could produce. Then I pulled the precious piece of parchment out of my pocket and proceeded to examine it.

The plan itself was dated MLXXXII., which I calculated as 1532. And though my history was extremely rusty, I worked that date out as being in the reign of Henry the Eighth. It showed the original house of Temple Tower, though, of course, not under that name, and the guarding wall. It also showed another building situated about a hundred yards from the house, which I

assumed must have been the now non-existent chapel. Connecting the two buildings from outside wall to outside wall, there ran the secret passage clearly marked on the plan. So that, at first sight, it appeared that once one was inside the grounds, with a tape measure, the entrance to the passage would be easy to locate.

"Good Lord! Darrell, where did you get that?"

I glanced up quickly, to find John James regarding me in amazement.

"Hullo!" I said. "Here's your bally old plan."

"So I see," he cried. "I didn't think it was a copy of the *Pink 'Un*. But how did you get it?"

"Sit down," I remarked, "and order the necessary. I could do with another. And I will tell you the doings."

"What's stung your face, laddie?" he said. "It looks kind of fixed in position."

"It is," I answered. "And it's all part of the doings."

He sat down, and I told him briefly what had happened.

"Well, I'm damned," he muttered, when I'd finished. "He's a cool customer. However, let's get back to the old plan. Turn it over, and we'll see what is on the other side."

The writing was crabbed and old-fashioned, and being in pencil, the words were none too easy to decipher. But at last we managed to make them out.

"When tower and eastern turret come in line, a tree
is found.
Thirty long paces north, and in the ground
The answer lies. But should you hear the sound
Of turning wheels—beware."

"Seems helpful," he murmured. "The only drawback is that we've got to get inside the grounds to make use of it. Moreover, we've got to get in by day."

For a moment or two I did not get his meaning.

"At night we probably shouldn't be able to see the bally turret," he explained.

"But look here," I said, "this bit of doggerel is only a repetition of the information in the plan. There's the passage clearly marked."

He shook his head.

"That's where you're wrong," he answered positively. "The plan only shows the spot where the passage passed underneath the old outside wall. The actual entrance was somewhere inside the chapel, just as the entrance the other end is somewhere inside Temple Tower."

"Then it seems to me," I remarked, "that I've got a stiff neck for nothing. For I'm darned if I can see how we're going to get into the place by day."

"It's just possible that the girl might be able to help us there," he said thoughtfully. "Scott's girl, I mean. She'll have to go back for her kit, and then she ought to have no difficulty in spotting the tree, and marking it for us somehow.

Anyway," he continued after a pause, "what do we do now, sergeant-major? There doesn't seem much good our sitting on here."

"Let's give it a little longer," I said. "I feel there is a bare possibility of our friend returning to find this. And it would be a pity to miss the blighter."

"Right ho!" he agreed. "As long as you like as far as I'm concerned. But my own opinion is that he's not going to come back for that. Why should he? He's read the verse at the back, and it's not difficult to remember. So that the plan is of no more use to him now, any more than it is to us."

"Perhaps you're right," I said. "Let's give it ten minutes or so, and then we'll push back for dinner."

I replaced the plan in my pocket, and lit a cigarette, whilst he got up.

"I'll wander down to the station," he said, "and get an evening paper. Then, if you're ready, we'll toddle when I get back."

He strolled out, leaving me to finish my drink. The lounge was empty, and the soft evening light slanting through the old-fashioned windows gave it a particularly peaceful aspect. Then four men, two of whom I recognised as golfers of Walker Cup repute, came in talking shop. And I wondered idly what they would think if I butted into their conversation.

"Excuse me," I might say, "interrupting your dissertation on putting, but have you seen a

masked hunchback lying about anywhere? Because I've just been very nearly strangled by one."

I began to chuckle inwardly as I imagined their expressions. And yet it was true, damn it, it was true. It wasn't a dream, and it wasn't an attack of delirium tremens. Then the clergyman came in, with the two elderly ladies in tow, and one of the golfers, who had abandoned his hobby for the latest from the Stock Exchange, lowered his voice discreetly.

I lit another cigarette and wondered if by any chance *le Bossu* would return. Probably John James was right, and he wouldn't. And even if he did, unless he actually walked into Number 19, how should I know him? I glanced upstairs once again, and as I did so I suddenly remembered that strange drumming noise that I had heard before *le Bossu* attacked me. It had come from Number 18, the Vandalis' room, and I began wondering what had caused it. It had been such a peculiar noise, unlike anything that I could recall having heard before. It had sounded almost as if someone was knocking on the wall with a mallet.

Could it have been a signal of some sort? If so, it must have been intended for *le Bossu* himself, and that proved at once that I was wrong, and the three of them were in collusion. But then, if that were the case, why bother to signal, when all that was necessary was to walk into the room and talk?

After a while I gave it up: like so many other things in this extraordinary affair, there seemed to be a dozen different possibilities. Presumably, in time, we should arrive at some result, but at the moment I felt I couldn't see the forest for the trees.

The door swung open, and I looked up hoping it was John James. I was beginning to agree with him that there was but little object in remaining any longer. But it proved to be the Inspector, and with him a shrewd-looking red-haired young man with journalist written all over him, who paused the instant he saw me, and then came over and spoke.

"Good evening, Mr. Darrell," he said. "You've forgotten me: on the *Folkestone Courier*. You were good enough to give me an interview when you were playing for Middlesex in the Canterbury Cricket Week two years ago. Extraordinary affair this, isn't it?"

"Very," I agreed. "What did you find out, Inspector? You were just going to Temple Tower when you left us this morning."

"Ah! Of course," he said, "you were with Captain Drummond. Just for the moment I did not recognise you. Well, sir, you'll understand that I can't say much. Though, to tell you the truth," he added ruefully, "I haven't got much to say. I'm defeated—for the moment only, of course."

"Quite," I agreed gravely. "You found out nothing from Mr. Granger himself?"

"Practically nothing," he admitted. "It took me the best part of half an hour to force my way in. I rang the bell again and again, and nothing happened. Finally a woman came to the gate, and I told her that unless she opened it I would have it broken down: that a murder had been committed in the grounds, and that by law I must investigate. As soon as I said that she turned as white as a sheet, and opened the gate.

"'A murder!' she stammered. 'Who's been murdered?'

"Now, she wasn't lying: I have enough knowledge of human nature to know that. She knew nothing about it: of that I am convinced. She shut the gate and bolted it: then she followed behind me. And when we came to the body she let out a scream and nearly fainted. I don't blame her, for the dead man was her husband. He was strangled just like the other, and he was not a pretty sight.

"However, to cut a long story short, I left her weeping and moaning and made tracks for the house and Mr. Granger. It took me the best part of another half hour to get in there: he kept peering at me through a hole in the door. Finally, he opened it, and then bolted it again as soon as I was in.

"'What do you want?' he said in a whining sort of voice.

"I told him, and I'll eat my hat if he wasn't as surprised as the woman.

"'Two,' he kept on croaking. 'Two men

killed! Gaspard—and who was the other? Who was the other?'

"He clawed at my arm, as I described the other, and a look of relief came over his face.

"'That's one of them, at any rate,' he muttered.

"'Look here,' I said sternly, 'there's more in this than meets the eye, Mr. Granger. And you know more about it than you are telling me. How comes it that these two men are strangled, one inside your grounds and one just outside? Somebody must have done it: do you know who?'

"But he wouldn't say any more: Just shut up like an oyster.

"'You'll be subpœnaed for the inquest,' I warned him. 'And then you'll be on oath, don't forget. Someone was in your grounds last night, and that someone did the murders. Moreover, I believe you know who that someone was!'

"But he just went on muttering and mumbling to himself, and finally I left him. There wasn't anything more to be got out of him for the moment: the man seemed half crazy to me. But we'll make him speak at the inquest."

"Did you go and see Spragge?" I asked as the Inspector paused.

"I did—later," he answered. "And I did not get much out of him. He identified the body of the man in the wood as the man who had been staying with him. And all he could tell me was that yesterday, about six o'clock, a note was delivered at his farm by a small boy for the lodger

—a note which threw him into a terrible state of agitation. He says he went out about eight-thirty and that is the last he's seen of him."

"Very strange," said the red-haired young man. "But good copy. Dead dog: two men strangled—one inside, one out. Very strange. I suppose you are absolutely certain it couldn't have been this man Granger himself?"

"Absolutely," said the Inspector. "He hasn't got the strength."

"Then—who did it?" demanded the journalist. "That is the point."

"Precisely," I mildly remarked, "that is the point."

"Has the doctor decided which was killed first?" asked the journalist.

"The one outside," said the Inspector. "Two or three hours before the other."

"Good!" cried the other. "Then we arrive at this conclusion, anyway."

He talked on: he was the type of man who would talk on for ever and ever, but I hardly heard what he was saying. It seemed almost impossible to realise that I could, in a sentence, explain to them the whole baffling mystery. And not for the first time did the worrying thought return to me: were we justified in withholding our information? True, I saw the difficulties that confronted us: what were we to say without incriminating ourselves? Still, the thought kept coming back, and try as I would, I could not quite pacify my conscience.

I glanced round the hall. The four golfers had risen, and I watched them idly as they reached the top of the stairs and stood for a moment laughing and talking. They moved aside to let a maid, with a can of hot water in her hand, pass them, and I remember asking myself if it were possible to imagine a more prosaic scene. The quiet English inn—the routine unvaried for years. And I remember my thoughts because of the sudden amazing change. Tranquillity, order, peace—and then, in a second, a screaming, hysterical girl standing in the open doorway of Number 18, while the hot water dripped from the overturned can into the hall below.

For a second or two no one moved: the thing was so utterly unexpected as to be paralysing. The golfers, with their mouths open, stared at her dazedly: so did we. Then, simultaneously, the power of action returned to all of us. I dashed upstairs behind the Inspector and the journalist, a thousand wild thoughts in my head. But the wildest of those thoughts had not prepared me for the ghastly sight that met my eyes as we entered the room.

Hanging to one of the old oak beams was Vandali. A glance at his purple, swollen face was sufficient: the man was dead. His body sagged grotesquely, almost touching the wall that separated the room from Number 19. And with a sick sort of feeling, I realised that the strange drumming noise I had heard had been made by the poor devil's heels as he died. At his feet lay

an overturned chair ; evidently he had stood on it, and then kicked it away from underneath him. I heard the others talking in low tones : caught snatches of what they were saying : "Poor devil," "Hanged himself," "Where is the woman?" : the disjointed phrases seemed to come from a long way off, and after a time I escaped downstairs.

Why had Vandali hanged himself? The question hammered at my brain. True, I knew nothing about the man : all that I could say was that I had seen him a couple of hours previously apparently quite happy and contented. What on earth had happened to make him commit suicide?

Then another thought struck me. When Madame Vandali left me she had gone upstairs. At the utmost, only a quarter of an hour had elapsed before I went to *le Bossu's* room. Therefore, whatever had caused the tragedy must have taken place during that quarter of an hour, because it was impossible to think that she could have found him hanging and said nothing about it. Had they had some terrible quarrel, as a result of which she had left him and he had then committed suicide?

It seemed almost incredible that such a thing could have happened in so short a time. And yet what other conceivable solution was there? Something must have happened during that quarter of an hour to make the man kill himself, and the only person who would be able to throw

any light on what that something had been was the woman.

But was she? Like a blinding flash, the thought struck me. Was she? When I had first peered up the chimney, I had stared into *le Bossu's* eyes: the next time the opening was shut. And when I had gone into his room, it was empty. Where had he been during that fateful quarter of an hour? Did that supply the cause of the quarrel? Was it the eternal triangle once again?

I tried to fit a possible solution on those lines round the facts as I knew them. No one knew what *le Bossu* looked like: quite possibly he was a good looking, attractive man. Suppose, then, that he was an old lover of Madame Vandali, she being ignorant of the manner of man he was. Suppose he had suddenly confronted her, and she had determined at once to leave Vandali. Would that do? And honesty compelled me to admit that if it did, it was only by the barest margin. It meant that in a few minutes she had made up her mind, and left the hotel without packing, having first reduced Vandali to such a condition of hopelessness that he took his own life. Thin; altogether too thin. And yet the whole thing was so inexplicable that one could not disregard even the most wildly improbable solution.

"What on earth is all this excitement?"

I looked up to find that John James had returned and was staring up at the landing with a

bewildered look on his face. I told him, and he sat down abruptly.

"Good God!" he said. "What did he do it for?"

"It is what I have been asking myself ever since it was discovered," I answered. "The whole thing is so utterly incredible that if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes I should hardly believe it. Well, Inspector, mysteries accumulate at Rye."

"I dunno as there's much mystery about this, sir," he remarked, crossing the hall to us. "Just a plain case of suicide. Good-evening, Sir John."

"'Evening, Inspector. Nothing to account for it?"

"Nothing, sir. I've asked the manager, and he can't tell me anything. A charming wife, lots of money; and, apparently, not a care in the world."

And at that moment the manager himself, looking anxious and worried, came up.

"A terrible thing, Sir John," he cried. "I wouldn't have had it happen in this hotel for the world. The scandal: and you know what people are. I don't suppose I'll be able to let that room again for months."

"By the way," I remarked, "I wonder if you can tell me anything about a Mr. Thomas who was staying here. The girl in the office tells me he has just gone, and I was wondering if it was a man I met a little while ago. He had Number 19."

But he shook his head, and looked at me as if surprised that so irrelevant a detail could be introduced at such a moment.

"No, sir, I do not," he said. "I believe I saw him when he arrived, but I don't remember having seen him since. And, anyway, this dreadful affair has driven everything else out of my head."

He bustled away as the doctor came down the stairs, as if he still vainly hoped to hear something that would lessen the tragedy. And then, in a feverish attempt to restore things to their normal time-table, he pealed the dinner-gong loudly. Gradually the lounge emptied, though there was only one topic of conversation to be heard on every side. And at length I was left alone with John and the doctor.

There seemed no object in staying, and yet I was loath to go. I could not help thinking that there must be some further development; that Madame Vandali must return or the man who called himself Thomas. But as the time went on and nothing more happened, it seemed useless waiting any longer. And we were on the point of going when the further development occurred. Only this time it was not an hysterical chambermaid, but the Inspector, whitefaced, who stood on the landing outside Number 18.

"Doctor," he called hoarsely. "For God's sake come quick."

The doctor ran up the stairs, and almost mechanically we followed him. What fresh horror

had taken place in that ill-omened room? On the bed lay the motionless body of Vandali, covered with a sheet, but it was not at that we any of us looked. For the cupboard door was open and on the floor was the huddled-up body of a woman. It was Madame Vandali, and she, too, was dead.

But in this case there was no question of suicide: it was murder. The mark around her throat was plain to see: she had been strangled.

"Good God!" muttered John shakily, "this is a bit grim."

"I was going through his effects," said the Inspector, "and happened to open that door."

"Lift her out carefully," ordered the doctor. "Though it is obvious nothing can be done."

He mopped his forehead, and furiously ordered away two waiters from the door, who were looking in with wide-open mouths.

As he said, it was obvious that nothing could be done. The unfortunate woman was quite dead. Her face, too, was puffed and swollen, though not quite so badly as the man's.

"Throttled!" said the doctor shakily. "Throttled to death, poor soul."

"Yes, but who by?" wailed the manager.

The poor little man, completely unnerved by this second tragedy, was standing by the door wringing his hands. And it was left to the red-haired journalist, who had mysteriously appeared from nowhere, to supply the answer.

"Him," he said, pointing with dramatic suddenness to the bed.

We all turned and stared at him, and his ferret-nose was literally twitching with excitement.

"But they were a devoted couple," stammered the manager.

Red-hair snorted contemptuously, and turned to the doctor.

"Was it you," he asked, "who examined those two men who were found dead this morning?"

"It was," said the doctor. "But what . . ."

"Man, don't you see?" the other almost yelled. "It is the clue: it is the answer. Who murdered those two men? Why—he did, of course."

For a moment no one spoke. I stared at John, and John stared at me: what on earth was he driving at?

"Look here," he went on excitedly, "it is clear to me. Tell me if I'm wrong. When you find three people mysteriously strangled within twenty-four hours in the same locality—what do you assume? Why—that they were all strangled by the same person."

The Inspector nodded portentiously.

"That's so," he conceded.

"Very well, then," said the other. "If someone else murdered these three, why should that man go and hang himself? But supposing it was he who did it: supposing he was a murderer by instinct, and had some terrible quarrel with this woman. Possibly without even intending to, he seized her by the throat and strangled her. That accounts for his hanging himself. When he

realised what he had done, half mad with remorse, he committed suicide."

The Inspector scratched his head.

"Yes—but why?" he began.

But Red-hair was not to be put off.

"Find out whether this man had anything to do with Temple Tower," he cried. "I'll bet you he did."

"You win your bet," I said. "I happened to be passing Temple Tower yesterday when he and this unfortunate woman were trying to get in."

"What did I tell you?" he said triumphantly. "There's your murderer: there's the solution to the whole thing. Why he did it the Lord knows—and possibly that man Granger. And neither of them are likely to split. But he did it. Damn it! is there any other solution? But for this quarrel here there was nothing at present to connect him with the two murders at Temple Tower. Now there is. Once a poisoner: always a poisoner. Once a strangler: always a strangler."

Once again I caught John's eye, and this time I signed to him urgently to leave the room.

"Ought I to speak?" I asked him as we went downstairs.

"How can you?" he answered. "What on earth can you say? You have got no proof. And, anyway, are you certain that that youth isn't right?"

"How can he be right?" I cried. "I heard Vandali's heels drumming against the wall before I was attacked myself."

"*Le Bossu* or no *le Bossu*," he answered obstinately, "I refuse to believe that a man can be forced to commit suicide. Come on: let's get back to Hugh's house. My head is simply buzzing."

"Where is Matthews?" I asked. "Weren't you going to pick him up?"

"He said he'd wait for me in the car," he said. "And if he wasn't there, I was to get along back."

There was no sign of him, and we started off. My brain felt as if it was going round and round in circles also: as John had said, no man can be forced to commit suicide. And yet it was not Vandali who was the murderer: of that I was convinced.

We found them all at dinner—Victor Matthews included, and they listened in silence while we told our story. And the first person to speak when we had finished was Matthews.

"I suppose," he said quietly, "that neither of you thought of asking the doctor if Vandali's neck was broken?"

We all stared at him: what was he driving at? And then he began to laugh quietly to himself as if enjoying some secret joke.

"Forgive me laughing," he said, "but it is indicative of genuine admiration. What a man! What a man!" He grew serious again. "We were wondering—all of us—how *le Bossu* was going to retrieve his error. Now we know."

"You think it was *le Bossu?*" demanded John.

"I don't think," answered the other. "I know."

"Then how did he make Vandali commit suicide?"

"He didn't—for the simple reason that Vandali didn't commit suicide."

"But," spluttered John, "confound it all—he *did*."

"You are wrong, Sir John. Vandali was murdered: just as the others were murdered. And by that simply and kindly little act on the part of *le Bossu* he has not only removed from his path two people he wanted removed, but he has supplied the ready-made solution, so ably discovered by your journalistic friend, to account for everything."

"But how do you know Vandali was murdered?" insisted John.

"Know is perhaps too strong a word," admitted Matthews. "And yet, I'm not sure that it is. Just think. If a man is hanged in the accepted sense of the word, his neck is broken, and death is instantaneous. But to obtain that result a long drop of several feet is necessary. In the case, however, of a man standing on a chair, and then kicking it away—there were one or two cases during the war of captured spies doing it—the neck is not broken. Death is not instantaneous, and is due to strangulation.

"Yes, but dash it all," objected John again, "what's that got to do with it?"

"Dry up, John," said Hugh. "I see what he is driving at."

"Strangulation, Sir John," continued Matthews. "So that, in reality, all four deaths were due to the same cause. Which puts a very different complexion on the matter, doesn't it? Our friend, by the simple process of hanging one of the dead bodies up, has made it appear as if only three were due to strangulation, and that the fourth was suicide. That being so, the solution to the whole affair would be exactly what the journalist got, and which *le Bossu* intended someone to get. I don't blame anyone for jumping to the conclusion that has been jumped to: without the inside knowledge we possess it is the conclusion we should arrive at."

"But look here, Mr. Matthews," I said, "there are still some pretty useful difficulties in the way. If we accept your theory we have also got to accept the fact that *le Bossu* walked quite openly into the Vandalis' bedroom, and strangled them one after another without a sound being heard. Further, that Madame Vandali, who must have been killed second, came into the room to find her husband hanging to the beam, and never uttered a cry. Why, she'd have screamed the place down."

Matthews smiled faintly.

"Agreed, Mr. Darrell," he said. "Put as you have done, it sounds a bit difficult. Let me, however, try and reconstruct what may have happened. While the two Vandalis were talking in

the little room below, *le Bossu* was listening. Vandali goes upstairs into his room: *le Bossu* leaves Number 19, and follows him in. There he strangles him and puts the body in the cupboard. Wait"—as I again started to speak—"I can guess your objection, but let me finish first. Then he goes back to his listening-post, and shortly after Madame comes up to the room. With her he repeats the process, and having killed them both, he hangs the man on the beam, and puts the woman in the cupboard. Then once again he goes back to his room, where he finds you. Now, it's obvious he can't kill you. To do so would be to shed the light of publicity on Number 19, and the mystical Mr. Thomas. So he renders you unconscious, packs his things and departs. Moreover, Mr. Thomas will be seen no more. He has served his purpose, and he now disappears from the cast—as Mr. Thomas."

"How do you mean—as Mr. Thomas?" demanded Hugh.

Victor Matthews leaned forward impressively.

"Assuming that my account of what happened is correct, and substantially it must be so, there is still one grave difficulty—a difficulty which I think Mr. Darrell spotted. If a stranger walks into your room, for whatever purpose, there will be some conversation, and probably loud conversation. In Mr. Darrell's case it was a little different: he was in a room where he had no right to be, and he was taken by surprise. But with the Vandalis—especially with Madame Van-

dali—one would have expected a scream or some cry, at any rate. And there was nothing—no sound at all. Don't you see the almost irresistible conclusion we arrive at?"

"I'm damned if I do," said Freckles.

"Why, that *le Bossu* was not a stranger to the Vandalis. He is a man, moreover, who could walk into their room without occasioning comment on their part. Jean Picot—the chauffeur: he is *le Bossu Masqué*."

He almost shouted in his excitement, and we all stared at him.

"It fits," he went on. "It must fit. He comes over as their chauffeur. All along he has meant to get rid of them sometime or other. Having arrived he takes the first opportunity of getting the room next to them, and for the purpose he disguises himself and takes the name of Thomas. So that he has two rooms in the hotel: Jean Picot's room, and Mr. Thomas' room."

He paused and lit a cigarette, looking round the table triumphantly.

"By George! laddie," boomed Hugh, "what a brain! Picot it is, for a fiver. What shall we do? Go and push his face in? Or have a mug of port?"

CHAPTER XI

IN WHICH WE SEE A FACE AT THE WINDOW

THE more one thought of it the more probable did it seem that Matthews was right. It accounted for so many little odd threads that had hitherto proved puzzling. Particularly the elusiveness of the so-called Mr. Thomas. It had struck me when I asked the girl in the office that she seemed very vague about him: the manager, too, in spite of the worry of the tragedy, might have been a little more helpful. But once one assumed that he and Picot were the same person, much of the difficulty disappeared. To a master of disguise, such as *le Bossu* almost certainly was, there would have been no difficulty over entering Number 19 as Mr. Thomas, and leaving it, if he so wished, as Jean Picot. His presence in that part of the hotel was easily accounted for in his rôle of chauffeur.

Then again the chimney-pot episode. It had seemed to me that it had caused the Vandalis so little surprise that they must be privy to it. And they probably had been, thinking it was Jean Picot who had pushed it over at Hugh. But a Jean Picot who really was their chauffeur and accomplice: not a Jean Picot who was using them to his own ends entirely.

All the way through it was the same thing, and it was impossible not to feel a certain unwilling admiration for the swine. For just so long as a

person was useful to him, *le Bossu* employed him. Then without the smallest compunction he murdered him. *Le Rossignol* was allowed to make his ladder, and almost put it in position on the wall. Then—death : that hideous silent death which, had it suited him, would have been my portion.

The Vandalis had been allowed to live only as long as they served his purpose. While it had seemed possible that they might get the jewels from Granger, *le Bossu* was perfectly prepared to let them try. He was, in fact, a past-master in letting the cat pull the chestnuts out of the fire for him.

It all fitted in, as Matthews said. On hearing of the plan he had forthwith driven off to Laidley Towers and obtained it, returning in time to hide in the shadow of the warehouse as we started off in the car. Then, later on, they were the lights of his car that we had seen on the main road—going and then coming back. And having drawn blank there, he had returned and tried the sea road till he found our car and removed the sparking-plugs.

"He's a blinking marvel," cried Hugh. "Equalled only by our Mr. Matthews."

Matthews waved a deprecating hand.

"My dear sir, you must not forget that I know him. But I assure you that on the score of brain I lay no claim to be in the same street as *le Bossu*. However, this time, by a combination of circumstances, I think we've got him. And our principal asset is Sir John's plan."

"You think he will still go on with it?" said John doubtfully.

"A man is not going to kill four people for nothing," answered Matthews. "And though the risk will be great, *le Bossu* is accustomed to risk. He must guess, of course, that we shall be there. That he knows about Miss Verney is, I should think, almost certain. And he will doubtless arrive at exactly the same conclusion as Sir John did—namely, that the best way of spotting the tree is for her to return to Temple Tower to-morrow, under the pretext of getting her luggage. Futher, he will assume that once the tree is found we shall lose no time in searching for the entrance to the passage. And then he will rely on his own cunning. That is how I see it, gentlemen. Moreover, I see another thing, too. The inquest will be, I should imagine, the day after to-morrow. He, if it can possibly be done, would like to be clear of Temple Tower before the publicity, which is going to be given to Granger and all his doings, occurs. And so I believe *le Bossu* will be prepared to run an additional risk, if he can pull it off to-morrow night. If it was feasible he would do it to-night, but it isn't. He does not know where the tree is."

"And so, on your theory," said Hugh, "we are going to be the last bunch of pussy-cats for the monkey. Supposing we refuse to play?"

"Nothing would please him more," laughed Matthews. "Though we have the easiest method of spotting the tree, there are others. A thing

like that is not going to deter *le Bossu*. And if we refuse to play we leave him a free hand. Besides, our friend is quite a good enough judge of human nature to know that you are not going to let me down. I've got to play, any way."

"My dear fellow," cried Hugh horrified, "I was only jesting. Why, great Scott! this is where the fun begins. We'll dot him one all right."

"The only point," said Freckles doubtfully, "is this. Now that we know Picot is *le Bossu*, oughtn't we to say something to the police?"

"The old, old difficulty," answered Matthews. "The difficulty which confronts us at every stage in our career. I speak as a policeman myself. We know—or we think we know: but can we *prove?* And at this stage of the proceedings we lay ourselves open to very grave censure for not having spoken sooner. Catch him in the act, and it becomes a very different matter. We have a definite result to show: a tangible asset. Besides"—his voice sank a little, and the dreamy look I had seen before came on his face—"he's my meat."

"Your meat he shall remain, old lad," laughed Hugh. "We'll just come along and help in the mincing."

And at that moment Pat Verney screamed. She was staring at the window, and as I swung round I had a momentary glimpse of Jean Picot's face pressed against the pane. His features were distorted with rage: his eyes were fixed on Victor Matthews. For a second I saw it, and then it

seemed to me that the crack of a revolver and the sound of breaking glass were simultaneous with the lights going out. A bullet went past my head with a wicked ping, and a further crash of glass showed that no one was hit.

"*Le Bossu,*" shouted Matthews. "After him."

"Who put out the light?" came Hugh's quiet voice.

"I did," cried Matthews. "I'm by the switch now. Somebody stay with Miss Verney: come on the rest."

"No earthly use," said Hugh. "The night is too dark. But I wish the damned fellow wouldn't break my glass. I think he was having a pot at you, Matthews."

"I'm quite certain of it," he answered.

"Good God! the door is opening," yelled Freckles.

And even as he spoke, there came a half-strangled shout which turned into a hideous gurgling noise. It ceased as abruptly as it had begun, and then the door shut again.

"Lights," said Hugh curtly. "And, Peter, keep your gun handy."

But the light revealed nothing except an almost incredible sight. Victor Matthews, with his hand to his throat, and his eyes staring, was half crouching, half lying against the wall. His lips were moving, but only inarticulate sounds came from them. And on his face was a look of utter terror. Hugh sprang to the door and flung it

open. The hall, which was dimly lighted, was empty, but the front door was open. And after a time he came back into the room.

"Our old pal *le Bossu* going all out," he remarked thoughtfully. "Undoubtedly a gentleman of nerve."

"Two hands—got me—by throat," gasped Matthews, and still the terror remained on his face. He was peering fearfully round the room, as if he expected *le Bossu* to materialise once more, and every now and then a long shuddering sigh shook him.

"Spot of whisky?" said Hugh. "By Gad! that's calm, you know," he went on as he crossed to the sideboard. "First of all he has a pot shot at you: and then he comes into the bally house, and says 'How d'you do?'"

"Do you require anything, sir?" Denny had quietly materialised. "I thought I heard a shot."

"Just go and say 'shoo' at the front door, my trusty fellah," said Hugh. "But mind you don't get strangled or anything. If you think it is likely, call me."

"Very good, sir. Shall I lock up after that?"

"Yes—lock up. But say 'shoo' two or three times, as if you meant it. And then bring some more glasses. And beer. You know," he continued as Denny left the room, "this bally fellow is growing on me. Peter—for sheer nerve—he's got old Carl Peterson beat to a frazzle."

"At any rate," I said, "it has definitely settled one thing. Picot is *le Bossu*."

"That is so," he agreed. "And it seems to me that the thing to do now is to lay out our plan of campaign, provided, that is to say, Matthews is feeling fit enough."

"I'm all right now, thanks," said Matthews. "The thing was so completely unexpected that it shook me for a moment."

"I'll bet it did," said Hugh. "Deuced nasty business having a bird like that keeping his hand in on you. Did you say 'shoo,' Denny?"

"Three times, sir," answered the butler, putting down the beer. "Only a cat responded to the threat."

"Good," said Hugh. "We may not cut much ice with old Picot, but with cats we're perfect devils. Now the next move, Denny, is with Mrs. Denny. Ask her to go and ferret round in Mrs. Drummond's gear and get the necessary wherewithal for Miss Verney for to-night. Miss Verney will sleep in the green room. Now, what about you, Matthews? I think you'd better stay as well. You can sleep in my dressing-room—afraid it is the only one left. And you can sleep soundly, because the only way into it is through my wife's and my room. So that if old Picot returns we can give him a thick ear between us."

"Thank you, Captain Drummond," said Matthews. "I'll accept your offer with pleasure."

He had quite recovered, and the colour had come back to his face. He now appeared almost amused at the whole thing: Hugh's very matter-

of-fact conversation seemed to have pulled him together.

"Splendid. Very well then, Denny—that's all settled. Lock up everywhere, and then you can turn in. Now," he went on, as Denny left the room, "to-morrow, at crack of dawn, somewhere round about ten o'clock, Miss Verney, accompanied by Scott, will repair to Temple Tower. Having arrived there, while Miss Verney gets her kit, Scott will wander round the grounds, get the tower and the eastern turret in line and then mark the tree so that we shall know it again. That clear?"

"Absolutely," said Freckles.

"Right. Then I suggest, Miss Verney, that you should push off to bed. You must be completely exhausted. And don't feel alarmed: you're quite safe."

"I'm not a bit frightened," she answered. "And I think I will go: last night was not a particularly restful one."

"I'm for the shore, too," said John. "Any chance of that bally fellow coming back?"

"Always a chance," said Hugh. "But we'll shutter all the ground floor, and unless he's a cat-burglar as well as a strangler, he won't get in. Off you push: there will be mighty little sleep for anyone to-morrow night. How's the neck, Matthews?" he went on, when the other three had gone.

"Quite recovered. But when next I meet Picot . . ." He paused expressively. "And

that will not be till to-morrow night. Our friend, I am open to a small bet, will not be much in evidence by day."

"No," agreed Hugh. "Probably not. Well, would you like me to show you your room?"

He led the way upstairs, and I mixed myself another drink. Used as I was to Hugh's methods and moods, there was something about him to-night that I couldn't quite understand. His complete calmness and nonchalance under the most unusual circumstances I was accustomed to, and his manner, since the attack on Matthews, had been just what I should have expected. But there was an underlying something that beat me. No one else would have noticed it, but then no one else in the room knew him as I did. And when he came down the stairs again I tackled him.

He gave a lazy grin.

"It's his gall, old Peter, his gall, that tickles me to death. Plastering notices on my trees, and then doing target practice amongst the crockery. Damn the fellow, it might be his house. And then to come in and give poor old Matthews the once over."

"But why the devil didn't you go after him?" I cried.

"Nerve shaken, old boy," he said earnestly. "I assure you I was all of a tremble."

"Confound you, Hugh," I laughed, "don't talk such appalling tripe to me. There's something at the back of your ugly face."

"A desire for beer, Peter. More beer. Much more beer."

He lit a cigarette, and, with his eyes half closed, he lay back in his chair blowing smoke rings. And now I knew I was right: it was the attitude he invariably adopted when he was thinking. Absolutely motionless, save for the movement of his arm as he lifted his cigarette to his mouth, he sat there staring at the ceiling. Then, quite suddenly, he began to laugh gently to himself.

"That's it, Peter. Gall to the *nth* degree. But, by Gad! old boy, a dangerous man to play games with—damned dangerous. I wouldn't miss to-morrow night for a thousand pounds. As Matthews says—it all fits in. As far as I can see, there isn't a flaw up to date—but what is he going to do when he finds us sitting over the entrance to the passage? It won't be too easy for the bird."

"My own impression is that he will do nothing," I said, "for the simple reason that there will be nothing to do."

"Think so?" he laughed. "Well, well—we shall see. Another pint, old boy, and then what about a little shut-eye?"

"What are you doing to-morrow?" I asked.

"This and that, Peter," he answered. "As a matter of fact, I think I shall take it easy. Do accounts, or something of that sort."

"Do accounts?" I gasped. "If you weren't so damned large, Hugh Drummond, I should welt you good and hearty."

I stood up: I was beginning to feel infernally sleepy. But when I reached the top of the stairs Hugh was still in the same attitude, with a fresh cigarette between his fingers. And from what I knew of him it was more than likely that he would remain there for hours. Something was worrying him, though for the life of me I couldn't see what. The one big problem—the identity of *le Bossu*—was solved. And the only thing that I couldn't see—as I said to Hugh—was what *le Bossu* could hope to do against five of us the following night.

I slept like a log, despite the stiffness of my neck, and arrived down to breakfast before anyone except Victor Matthews.

"*Le Bossu's* neck treatment seems to be conducive to early rising," I said.

"Yes," he laughed. "And somebody else was up pretty early, or stayed up mighty late. Your reporter friend has spread himself."

He passed over a copy of the *Folkestone Courier,* and I glanced at it. Undoubtedly Matthews was right: Ferret-face had wallowed in it.

AMAZING CRIME ON ROMNEY MARSH.

INCREDIBLE TRIPLE MURDER AND SUICIDE.

MYSTERY OF THE WALLED HOUSE.

The headlines shrieked at one, and I ran my eye down the page. It contained nothing that we did

not know already, but one point became increasingly clear, as I read on. Before many hours were out, there would be hordes of people on the spot, armies of reporters. The account in the London papers was brief—just a summary of what had happened. But with the *Folkestone Courier* giving tongue as it had, the other papers would be sure to follow suit.

"Get off as soon as you can, Miss Verney," said Hugh after breakfast. "It strikes me that this road is shortly going to look like Egham on Gold Cup day."

She started off with Freckles five minutes later, and he turned to Matthews.

"What's your programme?" he asked.

"Jean Picot," answered Matthews tersely. "There is no other problem. And though I don't think there is the smallest chance of my seeing him to-day, there is no harm in trying. There is nothing to do until to-night, and so I shall go into Rye and nose around."

"Good," said Hugh. "As you say, it can do no harm."

And when John decided that he would go back to Laidley Towers, the same arrangement as the previous day was fixed up. He would drop Matthews in Rye, and pick him up again on his return in the evening.

"That leaves only the old firm, Peter," said Hugh, as John's car disappeared through the gates. "And what does the old firm do?"

"Accounts," I grinned.

He was staring thoughtfully over the sun-baked marsh.

"Quite right," he said, "accounts. To settle accounts is always an excellent thing to do. But in view of the fact that you bore the burden and heat of the day yesterday, I would like you to take a rest to-day. I want you to stay here. You can knit yourself some underclothes, or indulge in any other form of dissipation you like. But stay here—and keep your eyes skinned."

"What are you going to do yourself?" I demanded.

"Settle accounts," he repeated. "Or, at any rate, do the preliminary bookwork. And if you've got no other way to occupy yourself, ponder on one thing. If you saw that plan sticking out from under the bed, why was *le Bossu* suddenly stricken with blindness?"

So that was what had been worrying him the night before. If his words had any significance at all, he was implying that *le Bossu* had dropped the plan on purpose: that it was no accident and he had intended me to pick it up. And the notion was so completely novel that I must have stood for quite five minutes after the roar of the Bentley had died away, staring down the drive.

All of us, and most certainly I personally, had assumed that the dropping of the plan had been a slip. We had based our plan of action on that theory: we had, in military parlance, appreciated the situation from that point of view. And here

was Drummond quietly suggesting to me that the whole of our foundation was faulty.

I sat down and began to weigh up the points for and against. And the more I thought of it, the more likely did it seem that he was right. *Le Bossu* had been in no hurry: he had quietly and systematically packed, taking about half an hour over it, and had then left. Was it likely that he would have dropped such a valuable asset as the plan, or, having dropped it in a distinctly conspicuous place, that he would not have seen it? Against that, why in the name of fortune should he have done it at all?

Matthews' theory that he would still carry on was based on the idea that, though he had lost the plan, he would turn his loss to good account, by letting us find the entrance for him. But it put a very different complexion on matters if he had arranged for us to have it. To make the best of a bad job was comprehensible: deliberately to make the job bad was not. And it was absurd to say that only by using Miss Verney could the location of the entrance be found. There must be other ways, even though she afforded the simplest.

The devil of it all lay in the fact that this new idea complicated things so much. While it had been left as an accident—as a slip on *le Bossu's* part—everything had seemed plain sailing. Now that we knew who he was, it had only seemed to be a question of waiting until he walked into our hands, either in the grounds of Temple Tower, or somewhere outside. But this notion of Drum-

mond's, if it was correct, altered the whole situation. What was at the back of *le Bossu's* mind, that had caused him to do it? He must know that we would take advantage of the verse and would find the entrance. Then why had he done it? And the more I thought of it, the more utterly incomprehensible did it seem.

Unless—I sat up suddenly—unless the whole thing was a trap. Step by step I traced it from the hypothesis. *Le Bossu* wished to get rid of us, as he had got rid of the other four who stood in his way. He wanted to murder us, as he had murdered them. But with us he was confronted with a difficulty: he couldn't get us individually as he had got them. We were always together. So he decided to try and do us in collectively. He presents us with a definite spot to gather together at, and prepares that spot beforehand, with some infernal machine like a bomb.

I checked there: how could he find the place? He might have got into the grounds after he had left us the preceding night—waited for the first faint streaks of dawn—and found it then. But in that case why didn't he beat it while the going was good, and go straight on into the house? So that wouldn't do.

And then in a flash it came to me. The spot was not prepared, but *le Bossu* was. Once when we were bunched together there, he would steal as near as he could in the darkness, and throw a bomb amongst us, either killing or wounding the lot. Then he would go calmly along the secret

passage, probably murder Granger, take the jewels and clear out. If alarm was caused by the explosion of the bomb, he would trust to luck to escape in the confusion.

Once again the incredible audacity of the man staggered me. That I had hit the only possible solution, once granted Hugh's theory was right, seemed to me obvious. There could be no other reason which would have caused him to give us a piece of information, which above all others it would seem he would have kept to himself. And the objection which might be advanced—namely, that without the plan we should not have found the spot—was easily met. True, we might not have found the exact spot, but we should have been wandering round in the locality. We had already interrupted him once, when he was killing the wretched Gaspard, and he was not going to run the risk a second time. And as the full realisation of the man's cold-blooded ferocity sank into my mind, I was inclined to agree with Hugh that compared to him, Carl Peterson had been a turtle-dove.

The morning wore on slowly. Midday came, and there was still no sign of Miss Verney or Scott, though an increasing number of cars had passed the gate on the way to Temple Tower. And then, at half-past twelve, the Inspector looked in, ostensibly to see Drummond, but in reality to quench his thirst.

"Reporters like flies," he said. "And there's one—probably a photographer—circling over the

house in an aeroplane. Look—there he is now."

I glanced up : sure enough there was a machine passing backwards and forwards over Temple Tower.

"You've found out nothing more, I suppose?" I asked him.

"Nothing, sir," he said. "I can't say that I hold with those newspaper chaps myself, but I'm bound to admit that I think that red-haired young fellow has got it right this time. That is, as far as the actual murders are concerned. The man Vandali did them, and then hanged himself. But as to why, he doesn't know any more than I do. To-morrow, I think, should help us a little there."

"At the inquest, you mean?" I said.

"That's right, sir—at the inquest. That man Granger will have to talk then. I've been up there this morning, but he says he is sick and can't see anyone."

"By the way," I said casually, "these Vandalis had a chauffeur, didn't they?"

He nodded, and drained his glass.

"I've examined him already," he said, "but he can't tell me anything. Speaks very little English. From what he says he has only been with them about a month, and knows nothing about them at all. Secretive sort of chap : I wouldn't be surprised if his past was a bit hectic. But as far as this show is concerned, he doesn't come into it. He has no idea whatever as to why they went to Temple Tower : didn't even know

they had been there, in fact. No, sir, Granger is the man. Even though he had nothing to do with the actual murders, he knows why they were committed."

He took his leave, and I sat on thinking idly. The aeroplane had finished its manœuvres over Temple Tower, and was making off in the direction of Lympne: presumably the photographs had been taken. And then, happening to glance at my watch, I found, to my surprise, it was one o'clock.

"Will you have lunch now, sir, or will you wait?" said Denny, coming out of the dining-room. "Mr. Scott has just returned."

"Hasn't Miss Verney come?" I cried.

"She has not," said Freckles, appearing on the scene. "I did my level best to persuade her, but when Pat sticks her toes in she's like a mule."

"We'll have lunch, Denny," I said. "Now what has happened?"

"After the devil of a lot of fuss we managed to get in," he began. "And, incidentally, it's lucky we went when we did: when I left the place, ten minutes ago, a crowd of some fifty people hailed me as the murderer. However, we got in all right, and Pat went straight into the house while I oozed round the grounds. There was no difficulty whatever about spotting the tree. It is a big oak standing by itself in a bit of a clearing, and you couldn't possibly fail to get it, even at night."

"Did you find the entrance to the passage?" I asked.

"I can't say I did," he said. "To tell you the truth I wasn't quite certain which way North was. I had a vague dip, but the only thing I saw was a rabbit scrape."

"Doesn't matter," I said. "We'll get it to-night by the Pole Star. Go on."

"Well, I sat about the grounds for over two hours, when Pat suddenly appeared. And, according to her, the bloke was entrenched in his room absolutely gnawing the blotting-paper with fright. Worse, far worse, apparently, than he's been before. Kept on saying 'He can't get in: he can't get in,' and wanting to know if they could force him to go to the inquest if he was ill. In fact, she seemed almost sorry for him, though I pointed out to her that, from what we'd heard, he must be a pretty ungodly maggot. Still, you know what women are—queer fish."

I nodded gravely.

"Is that why she is staying with him?" I asked.

"Not on your life," he said, lowering his voice mysteriously. "The old bean thinks she is well on the road to spotting some more cubby holes. Secret hiding-places," he explained kindly, as he saw my look of bewilderment, "where he has hidden the rest of the stuff. She's got one—the panel by the fireplace—already, and she strongly suspects the waste pipe in the bathroom to be another. Apparently he gave tongue like a wounded hare on hearing the water turned on,

but that was probably due to fright at the thought of washing. However, she thinks, to cut the thing short, that if she does a bit of nosing about this afternoon she might find out some pretty useful information. I thought it a bit risky myself, but she said that that was what Matthews had said she ought to do. And so I pushed off, and trickled back here. Though I don't like the idea much—leaving her practically alone in a house with a bloke crazy with fear."

Undoubtedly the Toad was in an awkward position. A criminal himself, with hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of stolen stuff in his possession, he dared not avail himself of police protection. Nor was he in a position to give the police any information as to the real terror that was hanging over him—*le Bossu*—for the very good reason that, unlike us, he didn't know who *le Bossu* was. He could give no description of him. And it struck me that if ever there was an example of evil bringing its own retribution, that was it. All these years, flying from hiding-place to hiding-place, in mortal terror of an unknown man. What a life! *Le Rossignol,* at any rate, he knew by sight, but any stranger might have been *le Bossu.* And then, when at last he had got his loot over from France, to be run to earth by both of them, unable to do anything save sit and wait behind his barricades."

"I wonder if he knows about the secret passage?" I said thoughtfully.

But to that question there was no answer: all that we could arrive at was that he had said

nothing about it to Miss Verney. Which, of course, proved nothing at all.

The afternoon dragged on slowly until at about seven o'clock Hugh returned, and I lost no time in putting my theory in front of him.

"I haven't said anything to Scott," I told him. "But, if your idea is right, and that plan was left there on purpose, I don't see any other solution that fits. He wants to get us bunched, and then out us."

But somewhat to my surprise Hugh would have none of it.

"Not that I put it a bit beyond him, Peter," he remarked. "If it suited his purpose, he would blow up a babies' crêche without scruple. But I cannot think that that would suit his purpose. Killing a stray individual silently is one thing : but to burst a bomb in the middle of the night is a very different affair. In all probability Temple Tower will have a certain amount of police attention to-night, and if the hell of an explosion takes place, it will be the scene of considerable activity. And there is another thing too, Peter. Supposing this entrance is all rusted over : supposing it takes a considerable time to get in ? Then, according to your theory, he is going to draw the attention of everybody to the one spot which he wants to keep private."

"Well, what the devil is *your* idea then ?" I said peevishly.

"Something far more subtle, old boy," he remarked with a grin, and from his tone of voice I

knew that that was all I was going to get out of him. There are times when an oyster is chatty compared to Hugh.

"Here is John," he said, glancing out of the window. "But no Matthews. I wonder where he has strayed to."

"I left the policeman wallah running round in small circles in Rye," said John as he came in. "I'd fixed to meet him at a quarter to seven, and he didn't appear till ten past. From what he said he seems to have found out something completely new this afternoon. And he told me to tell you not to wait dinner for him, but that he would come up after."

"Good," said Hugh. "Then we might get down to it."

"And what have you been doing all day, old horse?" went on John chattily.

"This and that, laddie," said Hugh. "Trying to make four equal six, to be exact."

"Presumably there is some meaning in your remark," said John kindly. "But at the moment I confess it eludes me."

"And yet the fact that under certain circumstances four are as good as six will, unless I've bloomered badly, prove to be the deciding factor," laughed Hugh. "Come on, chaps: let us go and feed our faces."

CHAPTER XII

IN WHICH WE HEAR THE NOISE OF TURNING WHEELS

THAT Hugh had some theory of his own was obvious, but by what possible method of subtlety *le Bossu* hoped to outwit us defeated me. His objection to my bomb idea was sound, I realised, but there seemed equally powerful objections to the use of cunning. Boiled down to rock-bottom facts, if five of us who all knew Jean Picot by sight were sitting round the entrance of the passage, it would require the deuce of a lot of subtlety to get past us. Force would be out of the question, and so what was going to happen? And the more I thought about it, the more did I come back to my original answer to the question —nothing at all. We should spend a night of intense discomfort for no result whatever.

Dinner was over and we were sitting in the smoking-room. In half an hour it would be sufficiently dark to start, but there was still no sign of Victor Matthews. And we were just wondering when he would roll up when the telephone rang close by my chair.

"Probably him," said Hugh. "Take the call, Peter."

It was, and I told him we were all waiting.

"Good," came his voice. "Listen, Mr. Darrell; the most extraordinary development has taken place. I'm hard on *le Bossu's* trail. I

think he has lost his nerve. Will you come at once—all of you—to Tenterden to the—— Oh! my God."

His voice rose to a hoarse scream, then stopped abruptly, and for a moment or two I was too stupefied to speak.

Then, "Matthews!" I shouted wildly. "Matthews! What's happened?"

But there was no answer—only silence, though again I shouted into the instrument.

"Steady, Peter," came Hugh's voice. "What is the excitement?"

"It was Matthews," I said. "He's just said he was hard on *le Bossu's* trail, and wanted us all to go to Tenterden at once. He was just going to say the name of the hotel, when he screamed out 'Oh! my God.' Then nothing more. *Le Bossu* must have got him."

"Give me the receiver," said Hugh quietly. "I'll ring the exchange."

We waited for what seemed an eternity.

"That last call you put through to me," he said. "Where did it come from?"

Again an interminable delay, and then he turned round.

"The A.A. road box," he remarked, "on the road to Tenterden. I know it well. How very extraordinary."

"Extraordinary!" I said. "It is more than that: it is uncannily devilish."

It seemed so easy to reconstruct the scene. Matthews pausing on his way to Tenterden, be-

lieving himself hot on *le Bossu's* trail. He sees the A.A. box ; decides to ring us up. And then as he stands there, unconscious of his danger, the very man he thought he was hunting steals on him from behind. The hunter hunted. And now a fifth murder to *le Bossu's* credit.

"Come on," said Hugh quietly. "This requires investigation."

We tumbled into the Bentley and started off. I could see Hugh's face silhouetted against the reflection of the headlights, and it was like an expressionless mask.

"It's simply amazing, Peter," he said suddenly. "I can't understand it. You're certain it was Matthews?"

"Of course I'm certain," I answered. "I'd know his voice anywhere."

He relapsed into silence again, and I tried to make out what was puzzling him. It seemed to me to be a development quite in keeping with the whole affair.

"Here's the telephone box," he remarked, "about fifty yards ahead."

He pulled up the car, and in the glare of lights the box stood out clearly outlined by the roadside. But of anything else there was no sign : the road was empty, there was no trace of any body.

"He would have hidden it," I said. "He wouldn't leave it where anybody passing could see it."

"No," said Hugh. "He would not. Can it be possible?" he added half to himself. He suddenly

switched off the lights. "Come on—we must look. But, for God's sake, move warily. There's something here I don't understand at all."

Halfway to the box he halted, and for a time we stood in the road listening intently. Not a sound could be heard save a train in the distance, and I suggested we should go a bit closer, and begin to search.

"What I'm afraid of," said Hugh in a low voice, "is a trap. If Picot strangled Matthews, he must have heard what Matthews was saying, as he crept up to him from behind. If so, what will he assume? Why, that we shall do exactly what we have done. The flies are walking straight into the parlour, and your theory, Peter, of the bomb is quite feasible here. We must string out: I'll go first. And don't make a sound."

He faded into the darkness, and we followed at intervals. Every now and then I stopped to listen, but I heard nothing except an owl hooting mournfully in a little wood ahead of us. Suddenly I saw a light on the road some twenty yards in front; Hugh had turned his torch on to the ground at the foot of the box, and was examining it carefully. I almost called out to him: if there was any chance of a trap, he was surely asking for trouble. But after a moment or two he switched it off again, and once more I crept forward till I came to the telephone box myself. He had disappeared, and for a while I stopped there trying once more to reconstruct in my mind what had happened.

What would *le Bossu* have done with the body?

Hidden it, of course, but hidden it as quickly as possible. A hedge ran behind the box, but as far as I could see there was no gap in it, and after a bit the hopeless futility of finding the body at night struck me. One might stumble on it, but the chances were all against it. And at that moment I heard Hugh's low whistle.

He was standing in the road, and I joined him.

"Look here, Peter," he said, "this is utterly futile. It's a hundred pounds to a banana skin against finding him."

"I quite agree," remarked Freckles, looming up. "I've stubbed my toe, and I don't want to play any more. The only way to spot him will be by day. Take an aeroplane and fly over the ground low, like that bloke was doing this morning at Temple Tower."

"What's that you say?" yelled Hugh. "An aeroplane over Temple Tower?"

"What under the sun is the excitement?" I cried. "I saw the fellow myself. A journalist taking photographs."

"Journalist be damned," snapped Hugh. "Why in God's name didn't you tell me that before? To the car—and leg it."

Almost speechless with amazement I followed him: what on earth was the great idea?

"The one point that was missing," said Hugh tensely, as the speedometer touched seventy. "If only you had told me, Peter! Don't you see, man, the vital significance of it? The line between the tower and eastern turret, when produced, hits the

ground at one end, and the other goes into the air. Get into that line from the air and you pick up the tree. It wasn't a journalist who was in the plane : it was *le Bossu*. And *le Bossu,* whilst we have been wasting time here, has calmly entered Temple Tower on the strength of the information that we thought only we possessed. Merciful Heavens !" he suddenly added in a low voice, "and the girl is there, too."

The car roared on, whilst I cursed myself bitterly and savagely. Why had the point not struck me? I had accepted the Inspector's remark about a Press photographer without thought. It had seemed quite a probable explanation, and I hadn't bothered to look any further. And now, with a sick feeling of fear, I realised the result. *Le Bossu* was loose in Temple Tower, and Pat Verney was alone and unprotected in the house. Just as Hugh has said, he had assumed we should come to Matthews' aid, and had turned that assumption to good account. Probably we had actually passed him on the road as we came, in one of the cars we had met.

"Lord ! Peter," said Hugh, as I expressed my opinion of myself, "this is no time for regrets. And it wouldn't matter a tinker's curse, old man, but for the girl. But it is the one point that has been worrying me ever since *le Bossu* presented us with the plan. How was he going to find the tree without our assistance? And since it seemed an impossibility to me, I assumed he was proposing to invoke our assistance. On that assump-

tion I mapped out his plan of campaign—a plan which I think I told you was one of subtlety."

"What was it?" I asked.

"All in good time, old boy," he said. "This is not the moment for discussing theories that have proved to be wrong. All that we have to concentrate on at the moment, is beating the gentleman. But I will say one thing: I agree with Matthews' description of him. He is a very clever and dangerous man. And I blame myself bitterly for having given way to an extremely stupid and foolish impulse."

But what that impulse was I had no time to ask, because at that moment we drew up outside Hugh's house.

"Bolsters," he said. "One apiece."

"What on earth do we want bolsters for?" cried John.

"Denny," shouted Hugh. "I want four big bolsters."

"Very good, sir," said Denny. "I will get them at once."

"If I asked for four elephants," said Hugh, "Denny would get them at once. My dear John," he remarked, "you don't suppose, do you, that our friend is going to leave the rope ladder in position on the wall? All nicely ready so that we can follow him in? He is going to get over himself, and then, with that wooden implement, remove the thing altogether, hiding it somewhere inside the wall. Moreover, he won't even go over in the same place as he went over before,

so that we can dismiss the ladder as a method of entrance."

"Four bolsters, sir," said Denny at the door.

"Good," said Hugh. "Now some ropes. I want about four yards."

"Very good, sir," said Denny. "I will get it at once."

"We may not have a rope ladder," remarked Hugh, "but we'll get a damned good makeshift. Don't get fidgetty, young fellah," he added to Freckles. "I know what you're thinking, but believe me these preparations are necessary. There ain't much good arriving at the wall and having to stand outside the whole night looking at it."

"I'm blaming myself over that aeroplane," said the youngster miserably. "It's I who ought to have spotted it much more than Darrell. Two or three times when I was standing by the tree I actually noticed the thing coming straight towards the house in a line with the tower. By God! if anything happens to Pat . . ."

"Nothing is going to happen to Miss Verney," said Hugh quietly. "And here is Denny with the rope. Now then, a loop at one end, and we're ready. Except for one thing. Here are three whistles. Each of you take one of them, and keep them handy. And those whistles are only to be used for one purpose. If, in the darkness, *le Bossu* gets one of you, put it to your mouth and blow like hell."

"Are you going to take the car?" I asked, and he nodded.

"It will be wanted before the night is out," he said enigmatically. "And this time we will take precautions over sparking-plugs. Now then—up and over."

And with a feeling strongly reminiscent of zero hour in France, in my chest at any rate, we followed him to the gate, carrying bolsters and the rope. But this trip there was no question of seventy miles an hour : we crept along at the car's most silent speed, with only our sidelights on. As I worked it out, *le Bossu* had about half an hour's start of us at the most, but half an hour was a terribly long time for that cold-blooded murderer to be given a free hand. And though I quite saw the necessity for silence, I chafed at the slow rate we were going.

A hundred yards from the beginning of the wall Hugh stopped. A grass track ran off the road, and he backed down it for about thirty yards till a jink in the hedge completely hid her from anyone passing. Then he padlocked both sides of the bonnet ; took out the safety key, and we left her.

To make absolutely certain, we first of all searched under the bushes where the rope ladder had been left, but there was no sign of it : Hugh's forethought over the bolsters was justified. *Le Bossu,* guessing it would be somewhere near the spot at which we had previously entered, had found it and used it, and we wasted no further time. We passed up the bolsters one by one to

Freckles, who was standing on Hugh's shoulders, and he wedged them in between the spikes. Then he fixed the rope, and in turn we swarmed up and down the other side. The final act had started.

The first thing to do was to locate the tree, and we crept silently forward. To keep in touch had been Hugh's order as we started, and he led us quickly through the undergrowth. Away to our right lay the house, sombre and forbidding. Two lights shone from it—one from a window at the very top, and the other from one about halfway up. At last we came to the old chapel wall, and he paused.

"Now then, Scott," he whispered, "you take the lead. And not a sound."

The tree stood, as Freckles had said, in a little clearing, and we found it without difficulty. But it was some little time before Hugh made the next move. He stood underneath it listening intently, though everything was silent, save for the faint creaking of the branches in the breeze. Once I thought I heard the crack of a twig not far off, but it was not repeated, and I dismissed it as imagination. And once I could have sworn I saw a dark shadow move between two bushes a few yards away.

"For God's sake let's get on with it," muttered Freckles. "This is giving me the jumps."

"Shut up," said Hugh curtly. "Use your ears and not your mouth."

At last he seemed satisfied, and stepped out

into the open. The Great Bear was easy to spot, and from it the Pole Star. Thirty long paces north—our next task—was simple, and there the answer lay.

The excitement of the thing was getting me now—what was the answer going to be? Should we find some hole open in the ground—some ancient rusted door, perhaps, through which *le Bossu* had already passed? Or should we find *le Bossu* himself still trying to force an entrance, and unable to do so single-handed?

Twenty-five: twenty-six long steps, and Hugh paused, again peering into the darkness ahead. I could hear my heart beating in the deathly stillness: even the night breeze had died away. But nothing stirred—nothing moved in front.

Twenty-eight: twenty-nine: thirty. We were there—but where was the answer? We were standing on an ordinary piece of roughish turf, exactly the same as the ground we had walked over from the tree. But of any secret entrance to a passage there was no trace. In front of us were more bushes, but the actual spot where we were standing was in a little open space. And round that space we felt our way, exploring every inch of it. The result was nil: something had gone wrong. Wherever the answer lay, it wasn't there.

That the tree was the correct one Freckles was prepared to swear. That the directions had been thirty long paces north we were all prepared to swear. So it boiled down to the fact that the directions were wrong. But if they were wrong

for us, they were also wrong for *le Bossu*. He was in the same boat as ourselves, and in that lay the only consolation.

The thing was so completely unexpected. All sorts of other difficulties we had been prepared for, but none of us had ever thought of the possibility of not finding the entrance at all. And the problem that immediately confronted us was what to do next. Somewhere within the grounds was the man we wanted; but how were we to get at him? Wait till dawn and hope for the best, or what? One thing seemed obvious: it was useless to try and look for him in the darkness. And that course being eliminated, it really seemed that there was nothing else to do but to sit tight and wait with what patience we could.

It was Hugh who was the most worried. Freckles, now that any danger to Miss Verney had gone, was quite happy: John and I were inclined to view the matter philosophically. But Hugh had worked himself into a condition of positive irritability, which was an unheard-of thing with him.

"I want that swab, Peter," he fumed, "as a cat wants milk. And what is he doing now? That is what I can't make up my mind about. Is he still here in the grounds, or has he done a bunk? Why should he stop on when he has once found out that the verse is wrong?"

"Well, my dear man," I said, "one thing is pretty obvious. If we can't find him inside the wall there is even less chance of our doing so out-

side. So it seems to me that we have either got to sit here and hope, or toddle back to bed."

And even as I spoke there came a most peculiar noise from the house. It sounded like the clanging of a gong, and we all sprang up and stared through the bushes. The noise went on for perhaps a quarter of a minute: then it ceased as abruptly as it had begun.

"A burglar alarm for a fiver," said Hugh. "Now, who has caused that to go off?" He was rubbing his hands together in his satisfaction. "He's inside, you fellows, he hasn't done a guy. And he is trying to get into the house. He has hit a trip wire or something of that sort. But where —damn it—where?"

Still we peered in front of us, trying impotently to see. Somewhere in that inky blackness was *le Bossu,* but he might as well have been in Timbuctoo for our chances of catching him.

"He can't get in through a window, anyway," said Hugh, "short of using dynamite. If only that damned fool inside would realise that he is far safer if he lit every room in the house instead of cowering there practically in darkness. Keep your eyes skinned for the flash of a torch, or the faintest suspicion of a light."

But there was nothing: the darkness remained impenetrable, and the minutes dragged slowly on. Had *le Bossu,* alarmed by the sudden noise, given up, or was he still in front of us trying to break in? It was the uncertainty of it and the impossibility of doing anything to make sure that was so

maddening. And yet we were better where we were than blundering round blindly. Suddenly Hugh gripped my arm.

"Peter," he said tensely, "look at the top room. There were three shadows there a moment ago."

I stared up at it: the light shone out undimmed. And then, there appeared for an instant the shadows of three people. Distorted into fantastic shapes, they showed up clear in the light —then they vanished again. Miss Verney and Granger—but whose was the third? Even as I asked myself the question it appeared again—grotesque and monstrous, with outstretched arms. *Le Bossu* was in the room.

"We must get in," cried Freckles in an agony. "We must. If necessary by the front door."

The boy was almost beside himself, and small blame to him. Until that moment the situation from his point of view had seemed all right: now everything was changed. If the third shadow was *le Bossu* the danger was enough to appal anyone, let alone the fiancé of the girl who was now facing him.

"Can't you fire through the window?" he muttered. "Drummond, you must do something."

"Steady, old boy," said Hugh, and though to the others his voice was quite normal, I caught the note of almost feverish anxiety in it. In fact, he told me afterwards that in the whole course of his life he had never felt so desperately afraid.

"I visualised the scene, Peter," he said to me a few days later, "as if I had been in the room myself. I could see Granger and the girl sitting there, believing themselves to be perfectly safe. And then the door slowly opening, and that great masked figure standing in silence watching them. Granger crazy mad with fear: the girl wondering desperately what to do, and where we were. She would play for time, of course, and provided Granger handed over the stuff, it was possible that *le Bossu* would spare her. That was all I cared about, naturally. Nothing else mattered. Even allowing *le Bossu* to escape altogether was infinitely better than that the slightest damage should come to her. But what to do? Peter, I damned nearly went bughouse. There was that poor devil jibbering beside us, and I knew that the most fatal thing we could do was to give away the fact that we were in the grounds."

"You see," he went on, "our only hope was to let *le Bossu* think he had the whole stage to himself. And the devil of it was that to all intents and purposes he had. He had got into the house, and we hadn't. And it was possible, I thought, that if he remained in ignorance of our presence he might not hurt the girl. Whereas, if we went and pealed on the front door bell, we gave the whole show away without doing any good. Up till then we had all of us thought that he, like ourselves, was outside. Now we knew he'd got in. How? Not by the door: not by a window. So how? It must have been by the passage.

"Gosh! old boy, my brain was moving as the poor old thing had never creaked before. Passage, passage, passage—the word positively hammered at it. *Le Bossu* had found the entrance: we hadn't. Why? We had followed out the instructions to the letter: the same instructions that he had followed out before us. But we couldn't have done, or we should have found the entrance ourselves. What followed irresistibly? Why, that the instructions we had followed were *not* the same that had guided *le Bossu*. It was just about that stage of my brain storm," he added with a laugh, "that I bit young Freckles' head off, if you remember, for interrupting. Poor devil! he couldn't help it, I know, but I was absolutely keyed up. I felt I was on the right track, but what was the next step?

"If the instructions were not the same, *le Bossu* had deliberately altered them before passing the plan on to you. He had read them aright himself first: then he had cooked them for our benefit. And at that point I almost despaired. He might have written anything—the most complete rot and gibberish. Bad thing—despair, and the ray of hope came quick. Would he have dared to write rot? His object was to keep us in some safe place out of the way, while he walked in. If the verse he had invented was meaningless, it would not have produced that result. Besides, he knew that at any rate part of the verse was far from meaningless: it had led us straight to the tree. Therefore the alteration he had made was

a small one—yet it was sufficient. And it was then that I made the remark that so astounded you : the solution had hit me like a kick in the stomach from a mule."

So, four days later, did Hugh fill in for my benefit the two minutes that followed the appearance of *le Bossu's* shadow in the upper room. To us who were with him, they had seemed an eternity. He had stood there absolutely motionless, without speaking, save for one remark, when, as he said, he bit the youngster's head off. John was muttering to me that we must do something : Freckles was almost sobbing in his despair. And then, like a bolt from the blue, came Hugh's sudden remark.

"Sixty yards. Ample at night. That's it. Wait by the tree."

"What the devil are you talking about?" I cried, but he had vanished, and, a little dazedly, we walked towards the tree. I could hear him near at hand : with *le Bossu* inside the house the necessity for silence had gone. And suddenly he loomed up out of the darkness.

"I've found the entrance," he said quietly. "Our friend altered two letters in the verse before passing it on to us. S to N and U to R. Thirty long paces north took us exactly sixty long paces from the spot we wanted to find, which happens to be thirty long paces south of the tree. Come on."

At the time it had seemed to me the wildest piece of guess-work that had come right : an un-

worthy suspicion for which I afterwards abased myself. But the fact that it had come right was all that mattered, and a few seconds later we were standing in front of the entrance. Some bushes screened us from the house, and Hugh switched on his torch.

It consisted of a hole in the ground, from which mouldering stone steps went downwards. It had evidently been covered with boards and rubbish, because these had been removed and now lay in an untidy heap beside the edge. Rotting green fungus was growing on the sides of the steps and walls, and the spot reeked with the putrid smell of decay.

Earth was lying thick on the steps, and in the light of the torch footprints were plainly visible—footprints which went towards the house and did not return, grim proof that we were not mistaken over the shadow. Not many minutes previously *le Bossu* had passed along that passage, and with a curt warning to walk warily, Hugh led the way down the steps.

The air was dark and foetid, though the passage itself proved to be of a comfortable height to walk in. The floor was rough and uneven, and the walls consisted of crude blocks of stone, moss covered and crumbling in places.

For about twenty yards it ran in a straight line: then it jinked sharply to the left, and Hugh paused.

"Presumably," he said, "we are now under the chapel wall. And from this point the passage

runs straight to the house. So we've got to carry on without a light."

He switched off his torch: undoubtedly he would have been a sitting shot for anyone lying up for us at the other end. But feeble though the glimmer had been in front, it had served its purpose: now that it was out, the darkness seemed the most intense thing I had ever known. It pressed on one till one felt it was tangible. Not one glimmer of even faint greyness, but a solid black wall closing in on one from all sides.

From my recollection of the position of the chapel wall, I estimated the distance to the house from the jink in the passage, to be about sixty yards. And I guessed that we had gone about thirty when suddenly the same noise began as we had heard in the grounds before. But this time it was much louder. It came from the house in front of us—the loud insistent clanging of a gong. I stopped instinctively: we must have run into the same alarm as *le Bossu*.

The others had halted also: I could hear John's quick breathing just in front of me. And what happened then, happened so quickly that it is hard to recall the exact sequence of events.

First there came a loud creaking noise from close by us—so loud that it quite drowned the clamour of the gong. Then a sudden shout from Freckles—"My God! the walls are moving." Then light—blessed light—from Hugh's torch.

Only one momentary glimpse did I get of the

amazing scene before Hugh's roar of warning galvanised us all into activity.

"Back for your lives."

And just in time did we all get back. Another half second and Hugh, who was the last out, would have been caught. As Freckles had said, the walls were moving : they were closing together for a length of about ten yards in front of us. Like two gigantic millstones they approached each other until they met with a dull thud in the centre. The meaning of the line about the turning wheels was clear.

"An unpleasant death," said Hugh grimly, his torch fixed on the solid block of stone that now confronted us. "But the damned annoying thing is that we are on one side of the obstruction and *le Bossu* is on the other. He got through and we didn't. Back to the entrance : there is nothing more to be done here."

And there was nothing more to be done there either. Fifteen yards only did we go before we found that the walls had closed behind us also. We were shut in the space between them : caught like rats in a trap.

For a moment even Hugh gave way to despair and cursed wildly : then he pulled himself together.

"No good biting the bedclothes," he remarked. "Let's explore our quarters."

The exploration did not take long, and certainly did nothing to raise our spirits. There was no possible way out, until the mechanism should operate in the other direction. We could go

neither forwards nor backwards. And the roof presented no hope either. It looked perfectly solid, and judging by the number of steps we had come down at the entrance there were at least four feet of earth on top of it. In fact the only ray of comfort lay in the fact that though the moving walls had completely blocked us in, there was a space between the top of them and the roof. Not large enough for one of us to crawl through, but sufficient to allow of the passage of air. There was no danger of our being suffocated. Also for the same reason our prison was not sound-proof: we could shout and in due course somebody would be certain to hear us. But who? What was the good of shouting when the whole house was in the hands of *le Bossu?* He wasn't likely to let us out.

It was the thought of that that drove us nearly insane. At that very moment, whilst we stood there powerless to do anything, *le Bossu* was free to do what he liked in the stronghold itself. And Miss Verney was in his power. He had the whole night in front of him to find the stolen stuff, and then what would he do? Kill Granger for a certainty, but what about the girl? If he was the type who would kill one woman, he certainly wouldn't scruple about killing another if it served his purpose. And then, leaving us where we were, he would quietly depart, having beaten us all along the line. True we did know who he was, but that was very cold comfort. To devote the rest of one's life to the pursuit of Jean Picot was an in-

adequate return for what he had done to us, even if we ever caught him.

We didn't talk : there was nothing to say, just as there was nothing to be done. Just once Hugh put his hand on Freckles' shoulder and said, "Buck up, old man : no need to despair yet." But for the rest we sat or stood in silence, each busy with his own thoughts. And after a while Hugh switched off the torch, which was beginning to run low, and black, overpowering darkness came down on us again.

Not a sound came from the house ; each minute seemed like an hour as it dragged by. And at length I began to doze where I stood. Suddenly I felt Hugh's grip on my arm : a faint light was filtering over the top of the barrier between us and the house. I glanced at the luminous dial of my wrist watch ; and it showed a quarter to one. For nearly two hours had we been imprisoned.

The light flickered a little, and then grew steady. Still there was no noise ; only that faint illumination proved that someone was about on the other side. Then, without warning, there came the most ghastly sound I have ever listened to in my life—peal after peal of wild maniacal laughter. It rose and fell—echoing round us : then, abruptly, it ceased. And a moment or two later the light flickered again, and then went out. Darkness was on us once more : darkness and silence.

"My God !" stammered Freckles in a shaking voice, "what was that ?"

My own forehead was wet with sweat, and even

Hugh's iron nerve was a bit shaken. Regardless of his failing battery he had switched on his torch : even its feeble glow was welcome after that devilish laughter. Was it Granger, or was it *le Bossu?* Gone mad suddenly . . . loose in the house. . . . And no one blamed the youngster when he suddenly hurled himself hysterically at the stone barrier and began to beat at it with his fists.

"Damn you," he screamed, "damn you—open."

And to our stupefied amazement it did. At the time—not knowing the reason—it seemed like a miracle : afterwards when we did know the reason, and the marvellous part played by that marvellous girl, it seemed no less of a miracle. But at the moment we could think of nothing save the fact that the prison door was opening. The wheels on which the walls moved creaked and groaned, until, with a thud, they came to rest in their proper place. The way to the house was free.

But not at once did Hugh move : the possibility of a trap was still there. It might have been the man whose frenzied laughter we had heard who had opened the walls. And if that was so he might be even now waiting for us out of sight, inside the house, to pot us one by one as we came out of the passage. At last he went with a rush, and from inside there came the single sharp clang of the gong. And with each of us as we dashed through the clang was repeated. But after that there was silence. No movement came from

the walls : no movement came from the house. The man whose laughter we had heard was not there.

We were standing in a sort of stone basement, from which stairs led to the upper part of the house. Further delay was useless now : the time had come to meet *le Bossu* on equal terms. And so we raced up the stairs behind Hugh. A light was shining above us through an open door. And in the doorway he stopped abruptly.

"My God!" he muttered. "Look at that."

We crowded round him. It was the hall we were in, and the big chandelier in the centre was lit. Hanging from it, just as Vandali had hung from the beam in the Dolphin, was Granger. He was swinging to and fro, and as he moved the tips of his toes brushed against the carpet.

Suddenly there came footsteps on the stairs above us, and we swung round. Faltering they were, and unsteady : no man was making them. A figure in white appeared, clutching the bannister : then, tottering and swaying, it came down towards us—a step at a time. It was Pat Verney, and with a great cry Freckles sprang to meet her.

But she hardly seemed to see him, as she stood staring at us with a look of frozen horror in her eyes. She just gave a little cry of : "Has he gone?" then, without another word, she pitched forward insensible.

CHAPTER XIII

IN WHICH THE ACCOUNT IS SETTLED

AND now, before I tell of the last grim fight between Hugh Drummond and *le Bossu,* I will go back a few hours, and write of what happened in Temple Tower while we lay prisoners in the passage. Not for three or four days did we hear it, and, bit by bit, we got it from Pat Verney. And because the horror of it was still on her, she got the horror of it across to us, so that I feel that I actually was present myself in that upstair room where it happened. Wherefore I will write of it as if I had been a silent and invisible witness, and not as the teller of a secondhand tale.

At eight o'clock Pat Verney had dinner in her own room. It was served by Mrs. Gaspard, and to her dismay she discovered that the instant it was dark the servant proposed to go. Nothing, she said, would induce her to remain another night in the house, and so the girl found herself confronted with the prospect of being left alone in the house with a man who was to all intents and purposes demented with terror. For a while she hesitated : should she go too ? She weighed it up in her mind, as she stood by the window staring over the grounds. Dusk was beginning to fall, and in her imagination she seemed to see phantom figures slinking through the undergrowth already. Then she took a pull at herself. Even if *le Bossu* did come, were there not five of us ? And already

she had discovered another of Granger's hiding-places : afterwards she might discover more. She had agreed to go and sit in his room at the top of the house, after she had finished her meal, and with luck she might get him to talk.

Nine o'clock came, and she turned on her light. In half an hour or so she would go to Granger : until then she tried to concentrate on a book. From below there came no sound : Mrs. Gaspard had gone, and much as she disliked the woman it seemed as if the last link with the outside world had snapped. She and the Toad were left alone to face the unknown terrors of the night.

"Don't be an ass, Pat Verney," she told herself. "You and your unknown terrors ! *Le Bossu* will probably get a thick ear, and with your share of the reward you will be in a position to tell Miss Mudge to go to blazes."

But try as she would she couldn't be altogether common sense about it. There was something in the incredible cold butchery of *le Bossu* that prevented anyone being normal about him. Supposing he did dodge us : supposing he came first —what then ? Little did she think that she was actually going to get the answer to her question, poor kid.

At half-past nine she put down her book : even Granger's society seemed preferable to none at all. She opened her door ; outside the house was in darkness. No lights were lit in the passage, and for a while she hesitated. No lights ever were lit in Temple Tower, but to-night she wondered

whether she should turn them on. From all around her came those queer noises that occur in every house after the sun goes down, but each sudden crack of a board sounded to her like a footstep on the stairs. And at length she turned and fairly ran up to Granger's room, feeling every moment that hands might come out of the darkness and clutch her by the throat.

The Toad was seated at his desk, muttering to himself. He looked up as she entered, and it seemed to her that he looked lower and more debased than ever. Some trick of the light perhaps, or a leering expression of cunning that had for the moment replaced his chronic terror, may have caused it, but the fact remained that she very nearly returned to her room.

"Sit down, Miss Verney," he mumbled. "Sit down. Will he come to-night, do you think?"

"Will who come, Mr. Granger?" she asked.

"The other one," he said. "The one who is the devil himself."

His clawlike hands were moving like talons, and suddenly he burst into a cackle of laughter.

"He has been once. I know: I know. But the police don't. He caught the Nightingale, and he caught Gaspard: with his hands—so."

Fascinated, she watched his hands curving as if a man's throat was inside them.

"The Strangler: the Silent Strangler," he went on. "That is what we called him in the old days. And other names, too. But *le Crapeau* was his match: *le Crapeau* beat him."

She said nothing: not by the tremor of an eyelid did she give away the fact that she knew the whole story. To let him talk was her object, in the hope that he might give away the secret of his various hiding-places. And it never seemed to occur to him that to anyone who knew nothing of the story what he was saying must have appeared absolutely gibberish.

"By the old mill near Bonneval the Toad hid the stuff. Deep down under boards and sacks. He feared the police: but he feared the other one more. For to offend the other one—to play him false—meant death. Till then, no one who had done so had ever lived: but *le Crapeau* did, for he could not find *le Crapeau.*"

"How do you know all this, Mr. Granger?" she said quietly.

But he didn't seem to see the relevance of the question: apparently it didn't strike him that he had given himself away utterly and completely. And after a while, as he went on chuckling and talking more to himself than to her, she began to realise that the man's brain had partially gone. Sudden flashes of suspicion pulled him up periodically in his rambling story, but only for a moment. Then he was off again in full spate, as she put it.

"Beaten them all," he kept on repeating. "*Le Crapeau* beat them all. He was clever, was the old one. And now he will beat them again. The Nightingale"—he shook with hideous, silent laughter—"the Nightingale. The Strangler got

him, but he won't get the Toad. The Toad is too clever for him."

"What does the Strangler look like?" she asked.

But he took no notice of the question, hardly seemed to hear it, in fact. On and on he rambled, incoherently mixing up the past and the present, until she gave up any attempt at listening. And after a while a sense of unreality stole over her: she felt the whole thing must be a dream. This crazy man gibbering and muttering: the bright-lit room, with its barred window making a black patch against the night, was a figment of imagination. And even as her eyes began to close, a sudden deafening clamour filled the room.

In a second she was wide awake. The noise was coming from a gong fastened to one of the walls. It was evidently worked by electricity, and for a time she stared at it in bewilderment. What had suddenly started it ringing? Then she looked at Granger, and it took all her strength of mind to bite back a scream. For the man's face was that of a devil. His lips were drawn back in a snarl, showing his yellow, discoloured teeth, and he was half standing, half crouching by his desk, with his eyes fixed on the gong. Then suddenly, with a grunt that was animal-like in its ferocity, he hurled himself across the room and forced home a big electric switch.

Almost immediately the gong ceased, and in its place she heard another noise, this time coming from down below. Then that ceased also, and

there was silence, save for Granger's wild laughter. He was dancing round the room like a madman, yelling and shouting, but after a while he calmed down a little.

"Beaten him: the old one has beaten him," he mouthed. "The wheels have turned: the Strangler is caught."

And now terror got hold of her: what did he mean? In a flash the line of the verse came back to her: The sound of turning wheels—beware. But what was she to do? Something had happened below in the secret passage: something which filled Granger with such delight that he was almost off his head. Something, moreover, which made him think he was absolutely safe.

She forced herself to be calm. She must act, and act quickly. Granger believed that the Strangler was caught below: to her it seemed certain that it was us. And so she did the one fatal thing. Believing us to be in some deadly peril, she argued that if it had been caused by putting in the switch, it would be removed by taking it out. And so, utterly regardless of the crazy madman, she dashed to the wall and pulled it out.

For a moment or two he did not seem to realise what she had done: then, with a scream of bestial fury, he hurled himself at her. Desperately, she clung to the handle of the switch, whilst from below came the creaking, grinding noise once again. What had shut was now opening: let her but hold it a little longer and we should be safe.

Thus she argued, whilst Granger clawed at her throat, mouthing foul abuse at her. Then there came one sharp clang of the gong above their heads, and silence from below. She had succeeded : we were free. Her hands relaxed weakly from the handle : she sank, half fainting, on the ground.

Standing over her, with murder in his eyes, was Granger. So great was his fury that he seemed to have forgotten the Strangler, forgotten everything save his animal fury with her. His hands shot out once more and gripped her throat—gripped it till there came a roaring in her ears. He was murdering her : would we never come ? And even as she had given up hope, a shadow fell on them both, and over Granger's shoulder she saw a great masked figure. *Le Bossu Masqué* had arrived.

"*Crapeau : Crapeau.*"

Like a whiplash, the words cut through the room, and the grip relaxed from her throat. For a moment or two the relief was so great that she could think of nothing else : then she scrambled to her feet with a feeling of sick despair. We had not come : *le Bossu* had. Opening the switch had been the worst thing she could have done.

"So, *Crapeau*, we meet again. What have you to say ?"

Granger, his hands plucking feverishly at his collar, was cowering in a corner, whilst *le Bossu* stood motionless in the centre of the room.

"Doubtless a lot, *Crapeau*. But it will keep for

a while. Just now I would like an explanation of that interesting mechanical device in the secret passage. Quickly, *Crapeau:* very quickly. I have an idea that before the night is out it may come in handy once again."

"Spare me," screamed Granger, dragging himself forward on his knees. "Spare me. I'll tell you everything."

"Speak!" hissed the other. "And at once."

"A stone in the floor," explained Granger in a shaking voice. "If you stand on it it rings that gong by electricity. Then that switch makes the walls close. It used to work differently, by some mechanism, but I had it altered."

"I see. So when you heard the gong ring, *Crapeau*, you knew that someone was standing on the stone. You knew that I had come for you, *Crapeau*. And so you put in the switch."

The Toad was grovelling at the other's feet in his terror.

"That is easy," continued *le Bossu*. "What is difficult is why you took it out again. Or was it the lady?"

"It was, you foul murderer," said the girl contemptuously, and *le Bossu* gave a little hissing chuckle.

"Considerate of you," he remarked. "Do you think the gong will ring again to-night or not?"

He stood there shaking with silent laughter, and she stared at him fascinated.

"Because, if it does, we know what to do," he

continued, "to ensure that we shall not be interrupted. Your friends are a little foolish to pit their brains against mine. And now, *Crapeau*"—he turned once more to the cowering man—"come here."

Granger rose and slunk towards him like a beaten dog.

"To gratify my curiosity I am going to ask you a few questions, and then we will proceed to the business of the evening. Where did you hide yourself, *Crapeau,* so that even I couldn't find you?"

"In Switzerland," whined Granger.

"Switzerland!" said *le Bossu* thoughtfully. "That's where you bolted to, was it? However, it matters not. What you did in those far-off days is old and stale, and I grow weary of you. All these years you have slunk through the world, *Crapeau*, in fear of your life. Never knowing when *le Bossu Masqué* would come: never knowing when his hands would steal round your throat. You hid yourself here: you barricaded yourself in thinking you would be safe. And now you see the result. Your precautions were useless: *le Bossu* has found you. The time of reckoning has come."

Clang went the gong again, and *le Bossu* turned to the girl.

"Quicker than I had expected," he murmured. "But this time the switch will remain in, young lady."

He forced it in, and, sick with apprehension,

she heard the gong cease abruptly and the creaking noise come from below. Then silence.

"A pretty little prison," purred *le Bossu,* "where your friends will remain until I have finished. And perhaps longer than that. It all depends—on you. Should you attempt to open the switch"—his fingers touched her throat, and she shrank back in horror—"I should have to take steps to prevent you succeeding. And then they might have to stop there for days, or even weeks. So remember. Go and sit on the other side of the room."

She stumbled over blindly: there was something immeasurably more terrifying in that soft hissing voice even than there had been in the animal fury of Granger.

"Now, *Crapeau,* to business. What have you sold in these past years? Give an account of your stewardship."

"Only enough to live on, and to buy this house," pleaded Granger. "By the blood of the Virgin, I speak the truth. The rest is all here: take it."

"I shall take exactly what I want," said *le Bossu.* "I trust for your sake that you have not sold the emeralds."

"They are here," cried Granger, fumbling with unsteady hands at the opening by the fireplace. "All of them."

Fascinated in spite of herself the girl watched *le Bossu* as he tossed them from hand to hand in lines of living green fire.

"The beauties," he whispered. "The beauties. Now, *Crapeau*—the rest. Put them on your table, and I will choose."

And then for the next hour the scene must surely have been as amazing as any ever thought of in the wildest fairy story. From different hiding-places all over the room came every conceivable form of treasure. Pearls, rubies, diamonds, exquisite miniatures, littered the desk, until the mind reeled at the value of what lay there. And all the time *le Bossu* sat motionless in his chair. Once only did he make a movement, and that was to pick up an exquisitely chased gold cup and turn it over in his hands.

"Divine work," he said thoughtfully. "A pity that it must remain."

Another hour passed in a sort of semi-stupor for her, while *le Bossu* made his choice. Each stone was carefully examined, and either returned to the table or placed carefully in one of the velvet bags he had taken from his pocket. No word was spoken, and once when Granger ventured some cringing remark he was bidden curtly to be silent. And for the second time that night the sense of unreality came over her. The great deformed figure at the desk, silent and absorbed : the fawning, obsequious Granger at his side, were just parts of some ghastly nightmare.

At length *le Bossu* rose : he had finished, and for a space he stood staring at Granger. His back was towards the girl, but in his eyes there must have been something which told the other the

truth. For with a sudden frenzied cry he hurled himself on his knees and grovelled for mercy.

"Spare me," he screamed again and again. "I have given you all."

"*Crapeau,*" came a terrible voice, "what was the penalty for disobeying me in the past?"

"Death," moaned the other.

"Is there any reason, *Crapeau,*" went on the voice, "why you should escape that penalty?"

And then *le Bossu* paused and swung round. For the girl had seized him by the arm, and was shouting at him hysterically.

"You're not going to murder him," she cried. "It's monstrous: it's . . . ."

The words died away on her lips, and she gave a little moaning sob of terror, and cowered back. For his eyes seemed to be glowing with some strange light, a greenish-yellow light, which bored into her brain and numbed her. Then like a flash he turned again. There came a choking squeal: then silence save for a faint hissing noise. *Le Bossu* was strangling *le Crapeau* before her eyes.

He seemed to her like some monstrous spider, who had at last got the fly in its clutches. Her brain refused to act: she could only lean against the wall moaning pitifully. And suddenly it was all over. With a thud Granger fell on the floor: the strangler's work was done. For a moment she stared at the victim's face. Then, with a little sob of utter horror, she fainted.

When she came to herself the room was empty. And it was only the heap of rejected stuff which

still lay on the table that told her it had been grim reality and not some ghastly dream. *Le Bossu* had been there, he had murdered Granger and had gone. But had he? For the moment he was not in the room, but at any instant he might return and complete his work by killing her.

Now was her chance to open the switch. Shakily she got to her feet, and it was when she was halfway across the room that the crazy maniacal laughter, which we had heard in the passage, pealed through the house. For a second or two she paused, clutching the table, wondering whether the murderous fiend was even now playing with her as a cat plays with a mouse. Then, as the laughter ceased, she took a little run forward and pulled out the switch. And so did she come stumbling down the stairs to us—a girl who had reached the breaking-point.

We lifted her on to the sofa, and then Hugh spoke. His voice was perfectly normal, and in all probability the others noticed nothing. But I knew at once that he was in a condition of cold, overmastering rage. It was rare with him, very rare: only twice before, I think, had I seen him in a similar condition. And it were safer for a man to sit on an open barrel of gunpowder with a lighted match in his hand, than to come to grips with Hugh Drummond in such a mood.

"Scott," he said quietly, "you and John will remain with Miss Verney. When she has recovered sufficiently take her back to my house. Come, Peter."

Without another word he strode to the front door and I followed. It was open : *le Bossu* had left that way. And the instant he was outside he dodged into the bushes : rage or no rage his judgment was not blinded. In absolute silence he made his way through the undergrowth, and at such a speed that I, used though I was to his uncanny power of movement at night, was hard put to it to keep up with him. Only once did he pause, and that was when there came from the distance the sudden roar of a motor engine. Then we reached the wall, and swarmed over.

"Leave those things," he said shortly. "There will be a good deal to tell the police before the night is through, and our method of entry will be one of them."

The Bentley was where we had left her, and started at once. No tampering this time, and a few minutes later we spun past Hugh's house.

"Where are we bound for?" I asked.

"The Marsh," he answered. "And the proof that four can be as good as six. But, my God! Peter, we've cut it fine this time."

Through Rye, and along the straight stretch to the fork, where he turned right-handed along the sea road. We were going to the same place as the first night when we had visited Spragge's Farm. And it was not until he was getting out of the car that he spoke again.

"If by any chance he does me in, Peter," he said gravely, "shoot him as you would shoot a mad dog."

So it was here that the final battle was to come. Somewhere in the sand dunes Drummond and *le Bossu Masqué* were going to meet. How Hugh knew I didn't ask : he was in no mood for idle chatter. That he did know was enough for me : that he had known all along was obvious now. And even at that moment, keyed up though I was, I couldn't help realising the torment of mind he must have gone through when, as a prisoner in the passage, he thought his plan was going to fail through no fault of his own.

Side by side we crept over the sandy hummocks. He was taking a course almost parallel with the sea, but a little inshore. And after we had gone about four hundred yards, he put out his hand as a warning. Evidently we were near the spot. In front of us lay a dune higher than the average, and up this he wormed his way on his stomach. I followed him, and then, inch by inch, I raised my head to see what was on the other side. And in that instant I understood.

Below us was the motor-boat we had found on our visit to Spragge's Farm. It had been moved from its original position, and now it lay, its bows pointing to the open sea, in a little creek. We had cut in on *le Bossu's* line of retreat.

"We may have to wait some time," whispered Hugh in my ear. "But that is better than being too late."

And then began an eerie vigil. The ceaseless roar of the sea : the harsh call of some night bird

above our heads, were the only sounds. And after a while there came that faint lessening of the darkness over Dungeness that heralded the approach of dawn. I glanced at my watch, it marked a quarter to three.

Suddenly Hugh gripped my arm.

"He is coming," he whispered.

I had heard nothing myself, but of old I knew that Drummond at night was not as other men. And then, I, too, heard the noise of a stone being dislodged. It came from inland, and I peered in the direction of the sound.

"There he is," breathed Hugh. "We will play with him a little, Peter."

And now I could see his outline plainly. He was coming along the side of the dyke towards the motor-boat. Moreover, he did not seem to be taking any precautions about moving silently: evidently he had no suspicions whatever that we were there before him. He paused by the side of the boat, and I half expected Hugh to hurl himself down the dune on to him. But he made no movement, though in the very faint light I thought I detected a grim smile on his face.

Below us, quite unconscious of his danger, *le Bossu* went on with his preparations. He was stowing some things away in the stern of the boat, and every now and then he lifted his head and listened. The possibility of pursuit was clearly in his mind, and once he paused for nearly a minute. One could just see his movements against the jet-black mirror of water: one was near enough to

hear the faint hissing whistle with which he worked, like a man grooming a horse.

At length he straightened up and stepped into the boat : he was going to take off the tarpaulin that covered the engine. I glanced at Hugh : it struck me that what he had said on the drive down was true now—he was cutting it fine. Once let *le Bossu* start the engine, there was every chance in the darkness of his being able to make the sea. At any rate, the only method of stopping him would be to fire more or less blindly at the boat. But still Hugh made no movement : like a piece of carved granite he lay there staring at the boat below.

Le Bossu folded the tarpaulin, and threw it into the bows. Then he got on to the bank once more, and the rattle of a chain told us he had cast off the painter. He was ready to go. For a moment or two he stood by the side of the boat, and clear above the noise of the waves we heard him laughing. Low and triumphant, and yet with the same ring of madness in it as that wild, frenzied peal he had given at Temple Tower. Then he got back into the boat, and again I glanced at Hugh. Surely he wasn't going to wait any longer.

Crank went the starting-handle : no result. Again he tried : nothing. His laughter had ceased ; and he tried once more. The engine refused to fire. And now I felt Hugh shaking silently beside me—and a dim premonition of what had happened began to dawn on me—a premonition which was confirmed a moment or two later. *Le Bossu* had

switched on his torch to examine the motor. All the four sparking-plugs had been removed. The meaning of Hugh's cryptic utterance about four being the equivalent of six was clear.

Out went the light, and from below us came a flood of the most frightful blasphemy. His voice was hardly above a whisper, but every word carried to our ears. Then abruptly it ceased : *le Bossu* was thinking. That he still had no inkling of our presence was obvious : he still believed himself to be alone. But alone with a useless motor-boat instead of alone and well out to sea. What was he to do ? He must have realised that the object of the boat was known to us ; and that being the case, that we should come to it the instant we got out of the secret passage. And he must have cursed himself for not having taken more precautions to prevent us doing so. As long as he had thought that the secret of the boat was his alone, it had not mattered when we escaped : now when he knew it wasn't, everything was altered.

One thing was clear : the idea of escaping in the boat must be abandoned, at any rate, for the present. Moreover, the sooner he was away from the boat, the better for him. Feverishly he began to unpack the things he had so carefully stowed away ; every second was of importance. At any moment we might be on him : from triumph he had plunged to failure. And it was then I realised that Hugh was no longer beside me : like a shadow he had vanished into the darkness. The time for play was over : the final settlement was due. I

hitched myself forward a few inches, and with my revolver ready I waited. How was it going to happen?

Suddenly from about ten yards away came Hugh's clear laugh, and with a hiss like an angry snake *le Bossu* straightened up. A few seconds later came the laugh again, but from quite a different spot, and *le Bossu* spun round. Then again and again came that laugh, each time from a fresh place. Dimly I could see *le Bossu,* crouching on the bank, his head jerking round quickly at each sound: playtime evidently was not yet over. The murderous devil was to have a taste of his own medicine before the end.

"Good-evening, *Bossu,*" came Hugh's drawling voice. "Your sparking-plugs are in my pocket. It was kind of you to give me the idea. Won't you come and get them?"

A snarl was the only answer.

"Five people, *Bossu,* have you murdered on this little trip. To say nothing of an attempt to brain me with a chimney-pot. I dislike people who try to brain me with chimney-pots, *Bossu.* So what are we going to do about it?"

And once again there came a snarl that was half animal in ferocity.

"I can see you quite clearly, *Bossu,*" mocked Hugh. "And you can't see me. Unfortunate, isn't it? Shall I put five perfectly good bullets into your carcase, one for each person you have murdered, or would you prefer to die another way?"

There came a sudden crack from below me, and a shot went droning harmlessly over the Marsh.

"Quite the wrong direction, my friend," said Hugh easily. "Don't, I beg of you, add a harmless cow to your bag. And you haven't answered my question. Which way would you prefer to die, *Bossu?* Because you are going to—very shortly. You won't say? Then I have a suggestion to make. You shall die as you have lived—by strangling. Does that appeal to your sense of humour?"

Silence from below, and once again Hugh laughed.

"Putting on the robes of office, are you, *Bossu?* The false hump: the mask: the long black hood. I have been wondering off and on why you bothered with quite such an elaborate make-up. The mask I can understand: even the hump. But it was the hood that defeated me. Am I right in supposing that a fold of loose stuff like that round your neck, gives you a considerable advantage if your adversary tries to meet you at your own game and endeavours to strangle you? I can assure you that you needn't be afraid of giving away any of your parlour secrets: you will never need them again. You won't speak? Not very chatty to-night, are you, *Bossu?*"

It was growing lighter now, and I could plainly see the great black figure below me. He was staring around like a wild beast at bay, trying to locate Drummond, and in his right hand was an ugly-looking revolver. And knowing the nature

of the brute I slipped my own gun a little further forward : it was not a moment for taking chances.

"It was clever of you to think of the aeroplane to-day," went on his invisible tormentor. "Indeed I don't mind admitting it was a stroke of genius. Very nearly—so very nearly—it enabled you to pull it off. In fact, *Bossu,* I quite agree with all that that dear fellow Victor Matthews said about you. But it doesn't alter my opinion that you are a nasty bit of work : so nasty, to be exact, that I grow weary of you. I would fain seek ale in my humble cottage. Throw your gun into the water, *Bossu.*"

The drawling voice had ceased : the order came curt and stern. But the man below still glared savagely round him. Came a crack, and a stab of flame. Another crack from *le Bossu,* who had fired at the flash, and Hugh's mocking laugh.

"Through your hump that time, *Bossu,* and more peril to the cows from you. I am a very much better shot than you, so if you take my advice you won't go on playing at that game. I give you exactly five seconds to throw your gun into the water. The next time I fire it will be through your revolver hand."

For a moment or two *le Bossu* seemed to hesitate : then without a word he flung his revolver into the creek.

"Good!" said Hugh curtly. "Now, *Bossu,* put your hands above your head."

Again came a momentary hesitation, then his arms, grotesquely draped in the black hood, went

above his head. And simultaneously Hugh emerged from behind a sand dune twenty yards away. His gun was in his hand, and he walked slowly along the edge of the water till he reached *le Bossu*. And then for a space there was silence.

I watched fascinated : had ever day dawned on a more incredible scene ? This monstrous masked devil—this murderer many times over, facing a man in whose face there was no glint of pity.

" Strictly speaking, *Bossu,* I suppose I should hand you over to the police," said Drummond quietly. " But we are not speaking strictly at the moment. And so I propose to give myself the extreme pleasure of anticipating the hangman. Do not imagine, *Bossu,* that I shall suffer in any way. I have here a witness in the shape of Mr. Darrell who will swear that you made a dastardly assault upon me, should any questions arise."

He paused : then he flung his revolver up to me.

" Right, strangler, I am ready. Do you begin, or shall I ?"

And now, the necessity for concealment gone, I stood up. I was almost shaking with excitement, but neither man paid any attention to me. *Le Bossu* had dropped his arms, and was crouching a little. His body swayed slightly from side to side : his hands, with the fingers curved like steel hooks, were in front of him, stretched out towards Hugh. And suddenly, like a flash, he sprang.

Came a dull heavy thud, and a short laugh from Drummond, as *le Bossu* crashed on his back.

Hugh's fist, with fourteen stone behind it, had caught him on the point of the jaw.

"Fight on, strangler," said Hugh quietly. "Fight on. There is no time limit to this round."

And then to my amazement he stepped back a pace. He was staring at *le Bossu* fixedly with an expression on his face I couldn't fathom.

"By God! Peter," he cried, "his eyes have gone green. The brute is not human."

But human or the reverse, the next instant he was fighting for his life. Snarling and panting, infuriated by the blow, *le Bossu,* for the next minute, gave Hugh all he wanted. Once he got his hands to Drummond's throat, only to have them torn away. He tried to wrap himself round Drummond: he fought like a maddened beast. And at one moment I, who knew his strength, began to feel uneasy.

But not for long: the strangler had met his match at last. Under the hood went Hugh's vice-like hands, and the snarling gave place to a hideous gurgling noise. Then that, too, ceased. And when Hugh finally relaxed his grip, it was into the boat, which he had planned to take him to safety, that *le Bossu Masqué* fell dead.

"His eyes were green, Peter," Hugh said to me. He was rubbing his hands together thoughtfully. "A sort of greeny yellow."

He bent over the dead man, and ran his hands through his pockets.

"The loot," he said curtly. And then—"Greeny yellow. For a moment it shook me."

"Anyway," I remarked, "Jean Picot will strangle no more."

He stared at me thoughtfully.

"You'll blame me, Peter: you'll all of you blame me. I ought to have told you sooner. But I never thought it would be quite such touch and go as this."

He stepped into the boat, and ripped off the mask and hood from the dead man. And I gave an involuntary cry.

"You knew?" I almost shouted.

"All along," he said.

For the man who lay dead in the boat, his face still distorted in the snarl of death, was Victor Matthews.

CHAPTER XIV

IN WHICH THE "MAID OF ORLEANS" RETURNS FROM BOULOGNE

"MY dear people," remarked Drummond lazily, "you have every right to pelt me metaphorically with bad eggs. I abase myself: I grovel. I should have let you into the secret. My only excuse is that between you I thought you'd give it away to the swab: and in addition I believed I had the situation easily in hand."

We were all of us sprawling in easy chairs in his garden late that afternoon.

"How did you spot it?" demanded Freckles.

"I spotted it when he was telling us the tale," said Hugh. "All about the Château du Lac Noir, which, incidentally, I have taken the trouble to verify. It was all absolutely true. In fact, where Matthews' cleverness came in was that all the way through ninety per cent. of what he told us was the truth. But to go back to the moment when I spotted it. He reached out his left hand to pick up a glass of ale. In doing so his sleeve slipped back, and on his forearm were some most peculiar red marks. They were evidently caused recently, because in places the blood was showing purple under the skin. And I found myself wondering idly what could have caused them. I suppose suspicions like that come in a flash, and to start with it was only a suspicion. It struck me that they

were exactly the sort of marks that would be caused by a dog savaging a man's arm that was protected by a sleeve. What does a fellow do, instinctively, if an animal flies at him? He flings up his left arm to protect his face, and uses his right for attack. I studied his sleeve. The cloth was not torn, but its condition was on the tired side. And from that moment I began to read everything that happened by the light of the supposition that Victor Matthews was *le Bossu Masqué*. I was prepared to abandon it at any moment, but it was always present in my mind. The revolver shot through his coat, of course, was a very old trick. It might have been fired by someone else: equally well it might have been fired by himself as a blind.

"The first thing was to go through everything that had happened, and find out if there was any episode that ruled it out. And up to date there wasn't. The chimney-pot on my head: there was no reason why Matthews shouldn't have done it. You get the line I was going on? True, there was no proof that he had: but there was no proof that he hadn't. Therefore the chimney-pot didn't rule him out.

"Stealing John's plan. Once again there was nothing to prove that Matthews wasn't the culprit. He had plenty of time to go to Laidley Towers, steal the plan, and then be back at Spragge's Farm at the hour we saw him.

"Then came number one difficulty—my sparking-plugs. True, there was time for him to have walked back to where the car was, after he had

been caught by the light, whilst we were lying up. It didn't absolutely rule him out—but I didn't like it very much. And Jean Picot began to float into my mind. Where did he come in? It was him we had seen skulking by the warehouse when we started in the car. Was he in league with *le Bossu?* If so what about the Vandalis? At that time I had to leave a lot to chance, and all I had arrived at up to date was that nothing had happened which absolutely ruled him out.

"Then came the biggest poser of all. Why, in view of the fact that he had got well away from us, after the murder of Gaspard, had he deliberately delivered himself, so to speak, into our hands? Well, the answer to that, after a good deal of thought, struck me this way. We were a completely unexpected factor in his calculations. Four large men, barging round for sport, were a complication he hadn't bargained for at all. He had failed to get into Temple Tower, through knowing nothing about the verse at the back of the plan. So he knew he would have to try again the following night. And he came to the instantaneous decision that if we were going to be there he would sooner have us as allies than enemies. That seemed to answer that.

"Then the Inspector arrived on the scene with the information about the Nightingale's murder. And I cast my optic on Matthews' face. There was no doubt about it: the news had upset him. He was annoyed. How did that fit in with my assumption?

"All right: at any rate, it didn't disprove it. When he murdered the Nightingale his idea was that he would be through with the whole thing that night, and since the Nightingale had served his purpose by supplying the ladder, he was a nuisance who might well be removed. If you remember, Matthews himself said all this afterwards, which was where his damned cleverness came in. It was true, and his momentary annoyance was due to the fact that, having failed to get in, the body had been found; as he said, it cut *le Bossu* short for time, meaning that it cut him himself short for time.

"Then along comes Miss Verney with the news about Gaspard, and he realises that both these murders, which wouldn't have mattered if he had succeeded the night before, are now going to complicate things badly. Police, reporters—the light of day on Temple Tower—altogether very awkward. How was he going to rectify it? I assure you I was as interested as he was.

"Well, we know how he rectified it. The cold-blooded, unscrupulous devil proceeds to murder both the Vandalis, and throws suspicion for all four murders on Vandali. Matthews was Mr. Thomas of the Dolphin. But it was there he nearly overstepped the mark. He had forgotten Jean Picot, a gentleman with whom I had a long talk yesterday afternoon.

"Jean Picot is another of these birds with a past, and Jean Picot has been serving two masters. He had been with the Vandalis as chauffeur for three years, and in his queer way was absolutely

devoted to her. But as I say, he had a past, and Matthews knew that past. And so he had but little difficulty in persuading Picot to help him. And, as a matter of fact, it was Picot who actually removed the plugs from the car, acting under Matthews' orders.

"But when it came to the murder of the Vandalis, Picot stuck in his toes. He knew it was Matthews who had done it—or Thomas as he called him—but he couldn't prove it. And exactly what happened in that room we shall never know. As Mr. Thomas, Matthews had undoubtedly become acquainted with the Vandalis. And presumably he carried out that double murder in much the same method as he described it. Only he put it on Picot.

"A clever touch, that. In the first place it gave him a ready-made *Bossu* to plant on us: in the second, it would fit in with any possible attempt Picot might make to get even. In fact, I should imagine that our friend, as he sat in the dining-room that evening, just before Picot's shooting practice, must have thought himself on velvet.

"He had removed four obstacles in his path, without any suspicion falling on him. The outside public thought the murderer was Vandali: we thought it was Picot. In addition to that he had all of us eating out of his hand. And at that time I thought, as I told you Peter, that his plan was one of subtlety. He had presented us with the map—incidentally, how any of you could ever have thought that was an accident I don't know.

It was the one flaw in an otherwise brilliant scheme. However, he had to take a chance, and he took it.

"We now know he made an alteration in the verse, but that does not affect what I believe his scheme to have been. It merely gave him an alternative line of action which, as events turned out, he availed himself of. And his scheme, I am convinced, was this. He intended to remain Victor Matthews with us to the end. With us he would have entered the grounds. No trace of *le Bossu*. With us he would have found the entrance: with us he would have forced his way into the house, and in the name of law and order compelled Granger to disgorge. And then, somehow or other, he would have given us the slip. That was his scheme, I am convinced, before I gave way to an extremely stupid impulse.

"You remember when Picot let drive through the window and Matthews turned out the lights. Well—I couldn't help it: I knew I was a fool at the time—but I just couldn't help it. The door openedly slowly, didn't it?—largely because I pulled it. Then it shut, largely because I shut it. And Matthews screamed and gurgled, largely because I had my hands on his throat."

"You're the limit, Drummond," cried Freckles ecstatically.

"Far from it, young fellow," said Hugh gravely. "It was a damned silly thing to do, knowing what I did. From being absolutely confident that he had us fooled, he suddenly became

suspicious. Was it Picot who had caught him by the throat, or was it not?

"However, the mischief was done, and I did my best to rectify it. I took the precaution of making him sleep in a room from which he could not get out without my knowledge, and I did my best to allay his doubts. But I know I didn't succeed. It was then he changed his plan, and took the alternative. It was then he decided to work alone: to make use of what he knew was the right verse, and leave us to stew in the wrong one.

"But at once he was confronted with a difficulty. Miss Verney and Scott were going to find the tree, and under his first scheme of working with us that was good enough for him: working alone it wasn't. He had to find that tree for himself. And he thought of the aeroplane.

"Admittedly the man was a devil incarnate, but you can't deny it was a stroke of genius. Not only did it make him independent of us, but it had the secondary effect of lulling me into a fool's paradise. I did not see how he could get in without us. That he was going to have a dip at it that night I knew: I was lying up in the Marsh yesterday when he moved the motor-boat from its original position to where Peter and I found it."

"That's when you took the plugs?" I said, and he nodded.

"How was he going to get in?" he went on. "That was what seemed to me to be the essence of the whole thing. And all through yesterday I still believed that my original idea was right.

Knowing nothing of the aeroplane or the change in the verse, it was impossible to allow for the alternative plan. Even when he gave his cry for help over the telephone, I still felt absolutely safe, though that little effort positively reeked of suspicion. Why an A.A. box, of all places, to ring up from? And by what possible fluke of fate could he expect us to believe *le Bossu* was waiting there for him? But once again, believing that we were indispensable to him, I saw no risk in going. In fact, to tell you the truth, so preposterous did it seem to me as a blind, that I half believed something had happened to him. That possibly he had persuaded Picot for some reason or other to go with him in the car, and that in the middle of a message to us, Picot had actually set on him. Anyway, we know he didn't, and Matthews got a start on us that, had it not been for Miss Verney, would have proved fatal. A very salutary thought, chaps: he got away with it as near as makes no odds, and but for her, he got away with it entirely.

"Anyway, that's that: only one little ceremony remains. From inquiries I made yesterday I gather that Count Vladimar still lives in the Rue Nitot in Paris. And since this property is his"—he held up the velvet bag—"I took the liberty of telling him that a charming lady, accompanied by a graceless young blighter, would wait upon him in due course to restore it, and to entertain him with an account of how it was recovered. He expressed himself as delighted, and confirmed the fact that the reward still stood. And so I have

much pleasure in presenting Miss Verney with the bag of nuts, prior to consuming one or even two beakers of ale."

"But it is impossible, Captain Drummond," cried the girl. "We must share it."

"My dear soul," said Hugh, with a grin, "it's too hot to argue. Peter would only spend it in drink and riotous living, and my share would go in bailing him out. As for John, churchyards are full of Inspectors of Taxes who have died of shock on seeing his income tax cheque. They didn't know there was so much money in the world."

And so it ended—that strange affair which had started in an Apache revel nearly thirty years ago. Vengeance had come on the last two of that motor-bandit gang: vengeance had come on the mysterious being who had employed them. Whether his real name was Matthews no one will ever know. From inquiries we made, the fact emerged that there was a man of that name, whose description tallied with Matthews, employed in the Paris police round about 1900, and whose reputation was above reproach. And if they were the same it may well be that it was an extraordinary example of dual personality, a second case of Jekyll and Hyde. For without some such explanation it is wellnigh impossible to conceive how the suave, capable, courteous man we had known could turn on the sudden into a snarling brute-beast murderer.

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The *Maid of Orleans* drew slowly into the side.

Leaning over the rail was the usual row of cross-Channel passengers calling out greetings to their friends on the quay. An odd Customs man or two drifted out of their respective offices : the R.A.C. representative raised entreating hands to High Heaven lest one of his charges should arrive without his triptyque. In fact, the usual scene on the arrival of the Boulogne boat, and mentioned only because you must end a story somewhere, and Folkestone Harbour is as good a locality as any.

Standing side by side on the quay were two men, waving their hands in that shame-faced manner which immediately descends on the male sex when it indulges in that fatuous pursuit. The targets of their innocent pastime were two women whose handkerchiefs fluttered in response from the upper deck. And since these two charming ladies have come into the matter again, it might be as well to dispose of them forthwith. They were, in short, the wives of the two men, arriving on their lawful occasions from Le Touquet, where they had played a little golf and lost some money in the Casino. Which is really all that needs to be said about them, except, possibly, their first remark, chanted in unison, as the ship came to rest.

"Have you both been good while we've been away?"

"Of course," answered the two men, also in unison.

THE END

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